

SCHIZOPHRENIA – 3: ROOTS AND REMEDIES

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

Last week I presented some of the major symptoms of schizophrenia. In this edition I shall explore the roots of schizophrenia and the treatment options.

Roots of Schizophrenia

As with other mental disorders, biology, genetic (inborn) factors and environment, but more especially biology, appear to be involved. Biological theories include how active and how well certain areas of the brain work, as well as problems with brain chemicals such as dopamine and glutamate. There may be structural differences too, like loss of nerve cells that result in larger fluid-filled cavities or "ventricles" in the brain.

Although genetic factors appear to contribute significantly to the onset of the disorder, most individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia have no family history of psychosis. There is also research evidence that genetic factors alone are not responsible. For example, identical twins may have the same vulnerability to schizophrenia. However, when they are brought up in different environments, one of the twins may develop schizophrenia, and the other may not.

The vulnerability potential seem to get actualised when the environment is very stressful. Studies of families of those who suffer from schizophrenia reveal a high incidence of parental psychopathology and disorders of communication which lead to high levels of stress and confusion. In fact, from a psychodynamic perspective this family dynamic is considered the trigger that actualises the vulnerability.

The bio-psycho-social model is the best accepted theory for causation of all mental illness, including schizophrenia. That is, biology (mostly functioning of the brain), psychological dispositions (genetic factors) and socio-cultural realities (the environment), all contribute to mental illness. Even though an individual may be born with a biological vulnerability toward a mental disorder, whether he or she develops it depends very much on their experiences, and the environment in which they find themselves.

Treatment

About 20 percent of those who suffer from schizophrenia appears to have a favourable course of recovery and a small number recover completely. However, most individuals with schizophrenia require assistance in daily living and many remain chronically ill, while some experience progressive deterioration.

Most often, once developed, schizophrenia becomes a lifelong condition, but it can be controlled, and in some cases as mentioned earlier, full recovery is possible. Even when the illness persists, many individuals who have the disorder are able to live normal lives, provided they are regular with their medication and therapy. John Nash, famous M.I. T., and later, Princeton University Mathematician (on whom the Oscar winning film *A Beautiful Mind* is based), suffered from paranoid schizophrenia for several years and then was able to continue to produce brilliant works and was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize for Economics, the Abel Prize and other prizes and awards, and honorary doctorates from several universities.

Early intervention has a significant impact on people with schizophrenia. Schizophrenia symptoms are often worse in the early stages of the illness, which is when the risk of suicide is highest. The majority of people with schizophrenia get better over time, not worse. In fact, 20% of people will get better within five years of developing symptoms, provided treatment is sought early and maintained.

Medication

The primary mode of treatment is through medication. Prescription drugs, usually known as antipsychotics, can reduce symptoms such as abnormal thinking, hallucinations, and delusions. However, these medications often have troubling and sometimes dangerous side effects. These include: dizziness, headache, fatigue, nausea, insomnia, dry mouth, weight gain, constipation, tardive dyskinesia (repetitive involuntary movements), low blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythm. In some cases because of possible complications, blood levels have to be frequently monitored. Fortunately the newer antipsychotics have fewer and less serious side effects. Still, because of the side effects many who suffer from it stop taking medications after a while and they relapse into serious symptoms again. But in most cases, medication is a must to treat schizophrenia. The challenge is to convince those who suffer from it to be regular with their medications. When the person refuses to take medicines, caregivers often mix them with their food or drink.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy can help those who suffer from schizophrenia develop better ways to recognise and handle their problem behaviours, manage their thoughts, and improve how they relate to others. The earlier treatment is sought, the better the outcome. One of the most often used approach is *cognitive behavioral therapy* (CBT), in which people learn to test the reality of their thoughts and better manage symptoms, clarify confusion and overcome self-defeating thoughts. *Family therapy* helps to improve family members' relationship with the person having the disorder as well relationships among members, especially to help families avoid both angry confrontations and equally harmful emotional distancing. Other forms of therapy take a psycho-educational approach that aim to improve self-care, communication, and behaviour and relationship skills in general.

Milieu Therapy

Among the treatment approaches one that shows most impact is what is known as *milieu therapy*, usually carried out in hospitals and community mental care centres. The idea here is to create an environment in which those who suffer from the disorder can practise number of social skills, engage in various activities including games, learn some handicrafts, and make themselves gainfully employed. They will be taught how to do everyday things, like use of public transportation, manage money, shop for groceries and other goods, or find and keep a job. They will also be taking medication and engaging in psychotherapy.

Food and Vitamins

Foods that contain important vitamins, minerals, and healthy fats are good for schizophrenia. These types of foods help support the brain and immune system, which can lower the intensity of the symptoms and enhance the body's capacity to respond to medications.

There is some research that suggest certain vitamins can be helpful, especially Vitamin D, various B vitamins, Vitamin C and Vitamin E.

Schizophrenia can hit anyone, and the results are distressing. But great improvement or even complete recovery is possible in some cases, through a combination of medication, healthy diet, psychological support, and creating a caring environment.

Introspection and Prayer

Mental illness, particularly schizophrenia, can cause much distress to those afflicted with the illness and their dear ones, friends and colleagues. But as this podcast has shown it is possible for those who suffer from it to recover and lead normal lives.

We could stay for a while with whatever the information provided in this podcast and our own experiences related to the illness evoke in us, and turn to our compassionate God who has our health and wellbeing at heart, and pray for healing for ourselves and others, as well as for wisdom and guidance to deal with situations that the illness creates.

Have pleasant weekend. Be safe. Be healthy. Be blessed.

Thank you for listening/reading.

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