



OUR SCHIZOPHRENIA BLOG

It's Time to Reclassify Schizophrenia

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Those of us who have family members diagnosed with schizophrenia know that this is a brain illness and not a behavioral disorder. We know this because we've already tried everything we're told to do and nothing helps. Except meds. Meds can help. Meds don't manage behaviors, though. Meds can help the underlying brain disorder that causes what appears to be behaviors. We all know that schizophrenia is not a behavioral disorder.

Yet we must send our loved ones to treatment at 'behavioral health' centers. The clinicians try to modify our loved ones' behaviors with punishment and reward (sadly, more punishment than reward). Parents are often still to blame and are left out of our loved ones' care. We're told we need to let go and let them fail. To me, that is unbelievable. If my family member had cancer, would I be told to let go? Would it be practical to let him fail? Of course not. The current system of care needs to change, drastically.

Or maybe not so drastically. The current system seems to be fine for some mental illnesses. Those disorders that are personality based, and not brain-based, are fine to be treated in the behavioral health system. People with mild depression or anxiety can benefit from therapy or art classes.

People with chronic psychosis won't like benefit from these programs, yet funding for people with schizophrenia and similar brain illnesses often goes to yoga, gardening, and parties.

The people I know who have schizophrenia struggle with socializing. Sending them to groups isn't practical unless their illness is well-controlled. When groups were recommended for my family member, I'd tell them he already has a group in his head. So why should he go?

Stigma

I have this belief that stigma would be eradicated if we move brain-based illness like schizophrenia into medicine and out of behavioral health. Stigma is the fear of being thought of as crazy. People tend to fear people with psychosis. When they see a homeless person talking to no one there, they cross to the other side of the street. People believe stigma is the cause of people not seeking treatment. That may be true. People don't want to admit they have a mental illness for fear of being thought of as they think of the person on the street corner communicating with voices.

The term 'mental illness' can mean so many things. It can include anything from stress to schizophrenia. There is recent talk of making obsessive video game playing a mental disorder. Basically, anything and everything can be a mental disorder. No wonder the system is so poor at helping people. They have such an array of things to deal with. It's like a restaurant that specializes in Mexican, Italian, Chinese, American and Indian food. When you have too broad a specialty, you can't do well on any one of those things. It's the same with mental illness treatment. Breaking up these disorders/illnesses would improve care on both sides.

If we move psychotic disorders into medicine, and leave all other mental illness in behavioral health, then eventually stigma will leave. If people with psychosis see a neurobiologist, and not a psychiatrist, then where is the joke? If you tell someone you have to see your psychiatrist, they may secretly (or openly) think you're crazy. But if you tell someone you need to see your neuropsychologist, you'll get concern. No stigma.

Why medicine?

Why not? Alzheimer's is in medicine. Parkinson's is in medicine. Autism is in medicine. Why not schizophrenia? There have been recent discoveries of the areas of the brain effected by schizophrenia. There are 108 genetic markers for schizophrenia. No one asks for this illness. No one causes this illness. Yet, most are blamed for the illness and discriminated against. If we treated the psychosis of schizophrenia like we treat the psychosis of other illnesses (such as urinary tract infections, kidney disease, and Parkinson's), then why don't we also treat schizophrenia as a medical illness?

Why don't we treat schizophrenia as a medical illness?

The simple answer is fear. We don't know enough about schizophrenia. Most of what we know terrifies us (the general population). What we see in movies adds to that fear. Norman Bates likely suffered from schizophrenia. *Psycho* was one of the most terrifying movies of all time. When we hear about school shootings, there is always speculation that the shooter has schizophrenia. (That may be true in fewer than 40% of school shootings.) One of the first questions I'm often asked when I mention my family member has schizophrenia is, "Aren't you afraid of him?". No, I'm not. He's not dangerous. He's sick. Very sick. There is so much ignorance, compounded by misinformation.

According to Linda Stalters, CEO of SARDA (www.sardaa.org):

Reclassification will lead to patients who are properly educated, protected, and comprehensively assessed and treated (medically, neurologically and psychiatrically). This will not only lessen the long-term chronic burden on society and families, but restore the lives of some creative, gifted and highly intelligent human beings. Holding off on reclassification because neurology and psychiatry aren't ready to merge and the "timing isn't right" would be a very poor excuse considering the millions of patients abused, left homeless and punished within our judicial system. It's time.

It is time.

It's time to move schizophrenia and all brain-based illnesses into medicine. No more stigma. No more discrimination. Actual brain illness treatment instead of behavioral modification and punishment. No more incarceration due to the way illness expresses itself.

No more.

I hope this information is helpful to you. Please comment with questions, suggestions or other information. For information about how to receive caregiver-centric support, stress-management, and disease-specific tips and techniques (from the convenience and privacy of your own home via telehealth), visit [MyHealios](#).