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Coping with Schizophrenia

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Introduction

I've been diagnosed with this condition in 2002, and since lived with it. I feel that major stressors contributed to it: First, 911 and the death of two loved ones, in addition to unemployment, later, a country move with consequential relationship breakup.

I had various symptoms and characteristics of this illness, including hallucinations, delusions, and voices. I have on one hand come to my own interpretation of these symptoms – mainly from a spiritual and parapsychological perspective – as well as adapted a number of self-help techniques.

First, to say is that I perceive much of the symptoms to be credible and relevant aspects of spiritual or mystical literatures. So, for example, I have the feeling I felt the presence of angels once, which in Christian religion is something accepted and very benign. Many similar such things, from different cultures and not all known in the literature, occurred. Many of those, such as Out of Body Experiences, astral travels, seeing auras etc. are known in the New Age literature and described and hence relatively uncomplicated.

I found spirituality most helpful to cope with this. As if one accepts these symptoms to be of this kind of nature, spiritual approaches – the common ones of love, kindness, fairness, tolerance, forgiveness, etc. in all religions – are helpful. Anger is not always avoidable, as we are still human, but I found that one can progress with practice and with adopting spiritual disciplines, such as regular meditation. Also, reading a lot of self-help literature or attending courses etc. is of incredible value. I personally tried a large number of various alternative therapies, many of whom I found of some use, in particular those inspired by Buddhism, Shamanism and Christianity. My favourite, however, are self-help books, of which I like Madonna Gauding Meditation Bible best. I regularly pray and use the loving kindness meditation. Overall, if schizophrenia is an illness of the mind, then it can be countered with mental exercises, at least somewhat.

Another relevant aspect is the use of vitamins, as described by Abram Hoffer first and later by others. I found this hugely helpful for reducing hallucinations and anxiety, strengthening the nerves and immune function and to help with general health. Omega 3 is basically, as I see it, brainfood (like nuts for students, but just more intense and nutritious). Apparently,

psychosis can also be brought about by my brain malnutrition or toxic overload, so supplementing with this and other vitamins is highly useful. Also, Niacin is useful for the nerves. Vitamin C is useful for general health. I have taken it for many years daily in at least 1 g dose and had only maybe 3 colds in 10 years and virtually no other physical illness! For smoking cessation, nicotine replacement therapy is best.

Also, healthy nutrition and exercise are useful. I use vegetarian or pescatarian fresh food and I walk a lot, with occasional other exercises. Both are also necessary in times of crises, as well as sufficient social contact. In times of crises, sometimes fasting also is helpful, often speaking to trusted people is what helps me most to relieve anxiety and reduce symptoms. Relationships, friendships, and family hence are of utmost importance. I found my worst psychotic episodes happened when I was entirely on my own in a place where I had no trusted social contact. As long as I am amongst people that I get along with, I am usually much better, even if I might be anxious or sometimes slightly irrational, which is probably simply human. But psychosis is worst when one is isolated for long periods of time.

Work also is of immense importance. Not only does it give the feeling of being of use, hence some self-esteem. It also provides structure, income and social contact, as well as constant learning experience and a purpose in life. In my contacts with others with this condition, I have learned that high level and mentally demanding jobs can be fulfilled by people with this illness. Lack of employment, on the other hand, creates the most facilitating conditions to make this illness a lifelong severe disability. It brings isolation, poverty, additional stigma, lack of contact and learning experiences, which all contribute to make this illness worse.

What helps me also is a Buddhist interpretation of one of the symptoms, the voices. In Buddhism, these are understood either as telepathy (mind to mind communication without words) or spirit communication. I find this interpretation highly credible, it is promoted by at least on branch of Buddhism and I have also found it reflected in Shamanism as a belief.

Dealing with Schizophrenia

Some summary of helpful approaches to live life fully with this condition:

Some useful coping methods alongside medication are as follows:

- Spirituality
- Vitamin Supplementation in combination with medications, but keeping medications to an as low as possible level
- Learning health behaviours (fresh vegetarian food, exercise)
- Social contact to talk about problems when they occur, avoidance of isolation. Work is very important for that as it serves with activity, purpose, income, and social contact.
- Reading, Education
- Various alternative therapies
- Self-esteem

Spirituality

If these symptoms are of a mystical or spiritual nature, then spiritual growth is required to adapt. Hence, spirituality should not be avoided in the search for a cure.

I found prayer, learning of spiritual capabilities (love, forgiveness, reading about the afterlife etc.) helpful, as well as loving kindness meditation, other meditations, and mantras, which can be adapted to any benign, unharmed purpose. Various literatures, courses, and churches exist to teach about different beliefs and spiritual practices. All are of use, and generally all promote the same overall goals: Belief in some higher power and the importance of love. My best liked book for learning meditation is Madonna Gauding's Meditation Bible.

In the autobiographical literature, one patient cured himself completely only by intensive Christian prayer.

Vitamins

Omega 3: 3 g between 1x and 3x a day, depending on need. Omega 3 is basically 'brainfood', similar to nuts. It is even claimed to enhance mental performance.

Niacin (between 1 and many grams a day as required) helps with smoking avoidance and calms, chemically similar to Nicotine, to which many schizophrenics are addicted. Nicotinamide, which is sometimes used, needs to be used with caution as it can cause stomach upset and a flushing sensation on the skin. Both are not harmful and pass with prolonged use.

Vitamin C is good for overall health, especially immune health and cold and cancer avoidance. Since I've been taking 1 to 3g Vitamin C daily, I've had only 3 colds in 10 years and virtually no other physical illness.

Other supplements might at times also be helpful, such as Magnesium against cramps, etc. Various literatures exist here, online and in book format.

While vitamin therapy for schizophrenia has been invented by Abram Hoffer, Patrick Holford and Eva Edelman are authors that should be looked into for this approach more. It is claimed by Hoffer and Holford that the use of large doses of vitamins is

not known in any way to be harmful (exceptions are some vitamins not mentioned here, such as Vitamin A) and instead is thought to prolong life, even in healthy individuals.

For chronic schizophrenics, this approach needs to be followed over many years to have full effect (up to 5 years for most at least), often probably lifelong. Existing studies could probably not show the beneficiality of the vitamin approach due to their too short duration.

Food and drugs

Avoidance of drugs is best, like with healthy individuals. The normal recovery programs are helpful here. Most commonly abused by schizophrenics are caffeine and nicotine.

Caffeine should be avoided in times of high anxiety, as it can increase anxiety. Decaf coffee, or, if wanted, teas, are a helpful alternative.

Interestingly, tobacco is considered a hallucinogen in shamanism. It might not be possible to stop nicotine, but nicotine replacement therapies are helpful here.

Nutrition is extremely important. I prefer fresh vegetarian or pescatarian food, and occasional fasting is also useful. This might also help against the common weight problems of patients as well as prolong life.

Exercise helps, most schizophrenics prefer gentle exercises, such as walking or hiking or swimming.

Social contact, income and purpose

Family, friends, work are extremely important. Most severe psychosis happens when social contact and structured activities are not available. Poverty, isolation, and deprivation contribute to this and are a natural outcome of unemployment. Against anxiety, being at work or amongst people, being active, being able to talk to someone, having the feeling of being successful and useful and liked, are often the main important things for coping.

A talking therapist can serve this function too, but the above are of course the healthier options.

Reading

Reading is very useful for keeping the brain active and combat delusions. I found literatures with positive content necessary at times to avoid depression or paranoia. Self-help books, especially about social topics, from cooking books to how to overcome loneliness and find love, career advise etc, I found extremely helpful.

Alternative therapies

Alternative therapies are often grounded in different cultures and some sort of spirituality. Both can be useful to learn coping techniques which are not available in the home culture, such as self-hypnosis, use of herbs, meditation, etc. If courses are too expensive, many literatures exist to teach these.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is as important in this illness as kindness and patience and might sometimes not be focused enough at in the traditional treatment options, in fact might be often harmed. Self-hypnosis can be useful here. One of the recovered patients that wrote an autobiography mentioned that self-esteem and confidence were of utmost importance for her recovery. And of course, self-esteem is also generally important to cope with life, especially if one has a disability that is stigmatised. In addition, if psychosis is really caused by trauma, as some researchers believe, then the rebuilding of shattered self-esteem seems necessary to recover. All trauma will necessarily negatively influence self-esteem and confidence and that could explain the most prominent symptoms of paranoia and withdrawal in many schizophrenics.

Possible crises

Migrations ends of relationships, unemployment, but of course also wars etc., can bring about major crises. In such time, like for anyone else, help might be needed more.

I found that major crises bring about the worst periods of symptoms, especially events such as wars, migrations, unemployment and mostly prolonged isolation.

Interestingly, I found that all major crises in my life, before and after my diagnosis, had happened around US presidential

election years, such as the end of the Cold War, 911, and following crises. I think there might be ripple effects from US elections in the world that cause major changes for many people, due to political changes in the politically leading state, and hence politics might result in many personal crises around election years to which adaptations are necessary at each time for each individual and which can result in psychosis in vulnerable individuals. This, however, would be only one possible aspect. Many more factors, of course, exist, which I do not want to deny.

All of these approaches might not be possible to implement fully and completely ad hoc for the newly diagnosed. But they should be goals of a lifelong learning process.

A Call for Further Research

What should be done in research is a survey study with recovered patients – about 30% to up to 50% recover completely, depending on different studies - asking them how they achieved their recovery, what helped them most to recover. Such study, even if completely common-sensical, has not yet been conducted. Potentially, such a study could provide clues to a cure to schizophrenia more than drug or similar studies.