

Schizophrenia: Unlock Strategies to Prevent a Relapse

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Abstract

Schizophrenia is a chronic illness with a relapsing nature. It is of paramount importance to avert a recurrence for the following reasons 1. The symptoms of a relapse are more severe than the previous episode 2. Burden to the family and society is humungous 3. It is imperative that a schizophrenic patient leads a normal life. Therefore, this article gives information on ways to monitor one's mental health and prevent a relapse.

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Introduction

Relapse in schizophrenia may be clinically defined as the emergence of psychotic symptoms to the point that crisis intervention or hospitalization is required. Understanding the relapse and remitting course is central to relapse prevention [1].

Why prevention of relapse is important in Schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a mental illness that demands vigilance. The sooner the symptoms of schizophrenia are recognized, the greater the likelihood is of regaining control [2]. Unfortunately, psychotic relapse is common, with up to 40% of all patients suffering a relapse within a year of being hospitalised. Relapse can cause significant personal distress, interfere with rehabilitation efforts, and result in psychiatric hospitalization [3,4].

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Events that trigger a relapse

Special phenomenon that may trigger relapses may include the following:

- Particular times of the year, week or day
- Anniversaries of becoming ill, of losses such as bereavements (including significant events in a client's life namely birthdays etc.)
- Change in medications
- Watching a film/TV programme or listening to music (May be a reminder or a trigger)
- Use of alcoholism or drugs [5].
- Loss or grief
- Poor adherence to treatment plan (such as not taking prescribed medications)
- Other stressful events
- An unpleasant event such as perceived failure, disappointment or criticism [6].

Strategies to prevent relapse

Access to supports:

Identifying and managing one's own health needs are primary concerns for everyone, but this is a particular challenge for clients with schizophrenia because their health needs can be complex and their ability to manage them can be impaired. Providing

facts about schizophrenia, identifying the early warning signs of relapse and teaching health practices to promote physical and psychological well-being are important [7]. Support networks including mental health services, friends, family members and medications need to be available along with a readiness to use such access [5].

Availability and flexibility are the cornerstones of relapse prevention. Patients and their support persons should be able to reach clinicians easily, particularly during evenings and weekends. Whenever possible, patients with schizophrenia who may be relapsing should be evaluated within 24 to 48 hours. Family members and supportive others can become the 'eyes and ears' of the treatment team in detecting the onset of relapse. They can also have a protective effect by helping patients manage stressful situations and by supporting adherence to treatment [1].

Recognising and responding to early warning signs:

Some people have unique, rather than common, early warning signs of relapse. The patient and family members are in the best position to recognise these signs. A relapse "signature" (an individualised pattern) can include a change in sleep pattern (especially a reduction in amount) tiredness, anxiety and depression and/or the re-emergence of psychotic symptoms. 'A touch of schizophrenia's coming on' or 'the fear of going mad' has been described as a frequent initial symptom preceding relapse [5].

The primary goal of monitoring early warning signs is to be able to act quickly to prevent relapses. The earlier you take preventive steps, the more likely that a relapse can be averted. Even if a relapse does occur, early intervention can decrease the severity of the episode and avoid hospitalisation. Even if hospitalisation is necessary, recognising and responding quickly to the early warning signs of relapse results in a briefer stay.

Providing additional medication during the first few days or weeks after early warning signs have been detected is a powerful strategy for preventing relapses and hospitalization [8].

Be Compliant to Medications:

Non-compliance with long term antipsychotic medications is very high. An estimated 40 to 50% of patients become non-compliant to medications within 1 or 2 years. It is generally recommended that patients with multiple episodes receive

maintenance treatment for at least 5 years and many experts recommend pharmacotherapy on an indefinite basis [9].

Clients may have practical barriers to medication compliance such as inadequate funds to obtain expensive medications, lack of transportation or knowledge about how to obtain prescriptions or inability to plan ahead to get new prescriptions before current supplies run out. Clients usually can overcome all these obstacles once they have been identified. Sometimes clients decide to decrease or discontinue their medications because he/she dislikes taking them or believes he/she does not need them. The client may have been willing to take the medications when experiencing psychotic symptoms but may believe that medication is unnecessary when he/she feels well. By refusing to take the medications, the client may be denying the existence or severity of schizophrenia. These issues of noncompliance are much more difficult to resolve [7].

Pharmacotherapy can be optimized by simplifying drug regimens, by considering the use of atypical and decanoate antipsychotic medications, and by minimizing drug side effects [11,12]. Side effects are a major cause of medication non adherence among schizophrenic patients. Since novel 'atypical' antipsychotic medications produce noticeable fewer EPS than standard antipsychotic medications, they have the potential to improve adherence and help prevent relapse. Recent studies have suggested that atypical antipsychotic medications are superior to standard medications in preventing psychotic relapse.

Learn Coping Skills:

An essential component of building healthy coping skills is a healthy life style which includes eating well, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep. Learning specific relaxation skills like meditation, mindfulness, deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga or cognitive-behavioural therapy skills can help a person calm down. Other activities like music, art or writing may also be helpful [6].

Mind-body relaxation plays a number of roles in recovery [12]. First, stress and tension are common triggers of relapse. Second, mind-body relaxation helps individuals let go of negative thinking such as dwelling on the past or worrying about the future, which are triggers for relapse. Third, mind-body relaxation is a way of being kind to oneself. The practice of self-care during mind-body relaxation

translates into self-care in the rest of life. Part of creating a new life in recovery is finding time to relax [13].

Conclusion

Primarily, there are two sides to prevention of relapse in schizophrenia namely identifying the early prodromal signs and indulging in healthy life style. Further, phenomenon that act as triggers and strategies to avoid a relapse was reviewed. To conclude, this article will empower one with skills needed for recovery from disabling schizophrenia.

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