

## ■ Advice for carers of people with schizophrenia

People with schizophrenia do not like high levels of expressed emotion – critical remarks, arguments, conflicts, tears and excessive emotion.

The most important thing is to understand how a vicious circle can easily be established, involving emotional stress which exacerbates symptoms, creating more stress, and so on. Stress levels can be reduced by carers looking at their own behaviour and trying to reduce the general level of expressed emotion.

- ◆ **Understand and accept the illness for what it is.** Try not to blame the sufferer, and accept that he or she is not responsible for the present behaviour and circumstances. Watch out for thoughts like, 'She could stop it if she really wanted to'. Try to accept that the sufferer may not be able to express their love or gratitude in return.
- ◆ **Avoid global critical comments** such as, 'He's always been a lazy so-and-so'. Instead try to make clear specific statements using the word 'I'. For example, 'I would like you to make your bed', rather than, 'He never does anything in the house'.
- ◆ **Practise good listening skills.** Schizophrenia often affects the individual's speed of thought and speech. Allow the sufferer more time to talk and more time to respond.
- ◆ **Reduce personal intrusiveness** or repeated attempts to establish emotion contact. The illness of schizophrenia means that very often the sufferer wants a more limited degree of contact. It's difficult to accept, but their needs may have changed. Sometimes it is useful to deliberately reduce the amount of time in face-to-face contact. Give them space and time alone if they need it.
- ◆ **Beware of over-protectiveness** and over-involvement. Sufferers can easily feel trapped and guilty if they feel that carers have become extremely self-sacrificing. Leave them alone in the house for a while and go out and enjoy yourself. This may involve taking risks but it is extremely important. Remember the sufferer is an adult – do not treat them like a child.
- ◆ **Set limits and make contracts.** Talk about what the family considers to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Make either formal written agreements or verbal agreements about negotiated changes in family members' behaviour. For example, the sufferer may agree to get up by a certain time in return for breakfast of his or her choice.
- ◆ **Take time out.** Both family members and the patient should be allowed to say when they feel a situation is getting more than they can deal with, and request time away from the situation. For example, the patient may say, 'I can only spend 30 minutes with the visitors, then I want to be on my own', or the family member might say, 'I can only listen to your problems for a certain length of time'. Find out about respite care.
- ◆ **Encourage some activity and socialising everyday.** A delicate balance is needed between overstimulation and understimulation.
- ◆ **Encourage the person to take their medication.** Schizophrenia is an illness, involving a chemical imbalance in the brain, and does respond to medication.