

Caring for Someone with Schizophrenia



by TODD STRYD

If you are reading this article,¹ then it's likely that someone you care about has been impacted by schizophrenia. My relationship to men and women afflicted in this way has been as someone who sought to help these strugglers as a counselor, chaplain, and crisis worker. Each individual and family has left a lasting impression on me.

Perhaps you are just coming to terms with this diagnosis and what it means for your loved one, and for you and your family. Symptoms and terms you weren't previously familiar with are now a daily part of your life. You are likely wondering about the way forward, or if there even is a way forward. This article can't hope to address all of the particulars of how this problem has shown up in your loved one, but I will seek to give you a road map for how to live with hope and compassion in the midst of a significant and devastating affliction.

Schizophrenia is a severe, chronic, and devastating human experience. While the symptoms, severity, and prognosis vary from person to person, in every case it significantly changes how someone experiences reality. It is an infirmity that interferes with a person's senses—seeing and hearing things

¹ This article is based on the minibook *Schizophrenia: A Compassionate Approach*, which will be released later this year by New Growth Press.

Todd Stryd (M.Div., Psy.D.) is counseling coordinator at CCEF and also serves on the faculty.

that others do not. It scrambles thought processes leading to confusion and an inability to answer questions. It intensifies emotions, sometimes leading to debilitating fear. As a result, maintaining relationships becomes difficult and longstanding connections can fracture. As the caretaker, you may find yourself wondering: how did this happen? Why is my loved one afflicted in this way? At such times, it's important to remember that schizophrenia is not a direct result of bad decisions, sinful actions, genetics, abuse, neglect, anxiety, depression, or a lack of faith. It is not the singular product of any one factor. Your loved one didn't make this happen. You couldn't have stopped it from happening. Schizophrenia reflects the corruption of this world. It has afflicted the one you love and devastated his or her life—and yours.

Hundreds of questions pour in as a loved one exhibits the characteristic distressing behaviors, emotional volatility, irrational thinking, and disconnect from reality. What do we do now? Is there hope? How does faith in Christ impact what we do? Where do we go for help? Volatility and uncertainty threaten to become the new norm. Nevertheless, within God's kingdom, there is hope, help, and even a degree of healing available for you and your loved one. My purpose in writing this article is to highlight that a biblically-informed compassion reshapes how to love someone with this problem.

Compassion Is the Lens

As you seek to minister to a person with schizophrenia, compassion is *the* most important quality. But as you navigate this new and complicated reality, compassion can be hard to come by. It's not an "on demand" attribute, accessible at the push of a button. It's not easy to generate, and it's challenging to know what to be compassionate about. So how exactly can you respond appropriately to someone with these complex problems that merit the label schizophrenia? *True compassion requires that you understand the affliction correctly, that you see people for who they are, and that you know the God of compassion. Your expression of compassion will be effective and sustainable only if it accurately maps onto reality.*

Psalms 103 is a good starting place for growing in reality-based compassion. It expresses the epitome of God's mercy and kindness toward us. The psalmist joyfully proclaims that the God of all does not treat us as our sins, failures,

and deficits deserve. Our weaknesses and limitations are, in fact, the occasion for his steadfast love and mercy. If you want to help a struggler, you need to know God's kindness for you in your struggles. Second Corinthians 1 directly connects God's kindness toward you with your kindness toward others. The apostle Paul invites those who are recipients of the Father's mercy and grace to share with others the very comfort they have received and are receiving.

Compassion, then, is not a technique. It is an expression of who you are. A compassionate approach to life's deepest troubles is a hallmark of the Christian faith and your way forward with schizophrenia. It is the lens by which you will understand and navigate this hardship. It offers a dignifying and humanizing response to your loved one. Christian compassion does not hide from reality. It is not hamstrung by the bizarre and distressing. It is not

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weak, naïve, or idealistic. Nor does it enable or cater. Rather, the Christian faith provides a refreshing perspective on human problems and the possibilities of recovery and even flourishing.

But a compassionate approach to care and treatment requires wisdom and power that you don't have. You need God. You need people. You need wisdom. In embracing this fact, you open the door to both information and assistance as you navigate this journey.

Some of the wisdom you need is the product of thoughtful, observant individuals who have devoted vast portions of their lives to understanding schizophrenia and working with strugglers—psychiatrists, psychologists, medical doctors, social workers, and mental health advocates. They have compiled helpful data, organized resources, and established vocational and residential supports. Compassion avails itself of practical information and practical resources.

But the greater part of wisdom is anchored in a commitment to the God

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