



Family Guide To Understanding Schizophrenia In The Person With Mental Retardation And Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD)

Schizophrenia is a common psychiatric problem in the general population and this disorder is more common in persons with mental retardation. Schizophrenia is produced by problems with brain wiring in normal individuals. Since many forms of mental retardation are produced by brain wiring problems, this disorder is more common in persons with mental retardation. Schizophrenia is also more common in people with seizure disorders.

The symptoms of schizophrenia depend upon the severity of intellectual disability. Persons with mild mental retardation can describe hearing voices, seeing things, or having false beliefs. Persons with severe mental retardation are often unable to describe the symptoms of schizophrenia. Persons with normal intellect also develop social and professional decline, which is called a “negative” symptom. These “negative” symptoms are more difficult to detect in persons with intellectual disability.

The hallucinations and delusions produced by schizophrenia can be distressing to the person experiencing these symptoms. Medications are helpful for some patients. The physician can prescribe a class of medications called antipsychotic drugs. These powerful, mind-altering medications will suppress voices and false beliefs. These drugs have many side effects that require careful monitoring by the physician.

Antipsychotic medications require six weeks or two months of continuous therapy to improve psychotic symptoms. The dose of medication depends upon the patient. Small, elderly or frail patients require smaller doses. Some patients can explain symptoms while others will exhibit behavioral symptoms. The family should monitor the benefit of these drugs by observing the patient for improvement of symptoms. Both the family and the doctor should be aware of common side effects produced by antipsychotic medications. The family can monitor for potential side effects and report back to the doctor. The goal of treatment for schizophrenia is improvement of symptoms. Medications may not completely eliminate hallucinations or delusions. The medication success is measured in terms of quality of life, reduction of behavioral symptoms, and improvement of function.