

Schizophrenia



What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a mental health condition. It is often associated with psychotic symptoms (when you perceive reality in a different way from the people around you), but it can also have 'negative symptoms', which result in a withdrawn presentation, and cognitive symptoms, which impact how a person thinks.

Schizophrenia is often a lifelong condition, most commonly diagnosed in a person's late teens to early thirties. Symptoms may be well-managed with medication, but relapses can occur. Some people with schizophrenia experience active phases (when they experience a range of symptoms, including psychosis) and periods where symptoms are less acute.

Symptoms can impact an individual's work life, school life, social life, self-care, cognitive abilities and communication skills. The main symptoms of schizophrenia include:

- **Delusions** – unusual beliefs not based on reality.
- **Hallucinations** – hearing or seeing things that do not exist outside the mind.
- **Expressive difficulties** - Unclear, disorganised speech or limited expression.
- **Withdrawn presentation**, lack of emotional expression.
- **Lack of pleasure, initiative and drive.**

Facts & statistics

1%

of people in the UK will experience an episode of schizophrenia in their lifetime
(*Living with Schizophrenia, 2017*)

25%

of women in prison reported symptoms indicative of psychosis
(*Prison Reform Trust, 2017*)

15%

of men in prison reported symptoms indicative of psychosis
(*Prison Reform Trust, 2017*)

Sources

Living with Schizophrenia [Website]
www.livingwithschizophreniauk.org/facts-and-figures,
Accessed [online]: September 2022

Prison Reform Trust (2017) *Mental health, autism and learning disabilities in the criminal courts*, Prison Reform Trust & Rethink Mental Illness

Impact on communication

If your client has active schizophrenia which is not well managed, they may present with a range of communication difficulties.

Their ability to focus on, 'take in', understand and use information may be affected. Their ability to express themselves clearly may also change. They might:

- Struggle to follow and remember information.

- Lack expressive clarity, speaking slowly, rapidly or with unclear speech. In some cases, they may speak very little, use invented words or speak in ‘jumbled’ sentences which don’t follow a clear narrative.
- Respond with unrelated answers and jump from one topic to another. Experiencing hallucinations or delusions may also make it difficult for them to focus, engage in a discussion and stay ‘on topic’.
- Miss or misinterpret nonverbal cues such as facial expression and tone of voice.
- Find social situations and trusting others difficult, especially if they are experiencing delusions.



Use open body language and neutral facial expressions.



Speak calmly, in very short sentences. Ask short, direct questions. Allow lots of processing time.



Check your understanding. If unclear, repeat your understanding of your client’s utterances back to them, to check whether this was correct. Asking your client to repeat themselves or to write information down may also assist (if speech is unclear).

Other effects

Your client may experience other symptoms which affect their participation in legal proceedings. For example, they may:

- Become easily distracted, irritable or angry.
- Experience low moods, find it difficult to carry out daily tasks and engage with others.
- Experience sleep or appetite disturbances, which can affect concentration.
- Display sudden or disorganized movements or show no movement at all.
- Appear as if they are looking at something or talking to someone or something that you can’t hear or see.



Gently refocus your client by signposting them to the current topic. A topic or task list may prove helpful.



Learn more about your client’s medication. If this has side effects, schedule meetings at times when they will be most alert and least fatigued.



Invite a trusted friend or family member to attend meetings with your client, if appropriate.



Informally introduce your client to all courtroom professionals at the outset of proceedings.

Tips for legal professionals



Don’t dismiss or minimise your client’s hallucinations or delusions, but don’t corroborate them. Take a neutral position: *“I know you think XYZ, but it’s not like that for me”*.



Avoid engaging in small talk with other advocates in front of your client, to promote trust and ensure professional boundaries are clear to them.

Further reading

- The Advocate's Gateway - [Toolkit 12: Planning to question someone with a suspected \(or diagnosed\) mental health disorder](#)
- [Evidence that communication impairment in schizophrenia is associated with generalized poor task performance](#) (Merrill et al, 2017)
- [Court Experience of Adults with Mental Health Conditions, Learning Disabilities and Limited Mental Capacity Report 3: 'Before court'](#) (Ministry of Justice Research Series, 2010)
- [Mental health, autism and learning disabilities in the criminal courts](#) (Prison Reform Trust & Rethink Mental Illness, 2017)
- [Rethink Mental Illness: Schizophrenia](#)

From The Access Brief

- [Supporting emotional regulation](#)
- [Supporting attention](#)
- [Expressive communication difficulties](#)
- [Intermediary assessments](#)
- [How can an intermediary assist at trial?](#)



Intermediary services

If you are concerned about your client's ability to communicate effectively and participate in legal proceedings, Communicourt can help.

We will assess your client to understand their communication needs and how these might affect them in court. Your client does not need to have a diagnosis. Our reports will identify any particular communication issues and make bespoke recommendations to help you and your client throughout proceedings.

If intermediary assistance is recommended, one of our highly trained intermediaries can be there throughout proceedings to facilitate those recommendations.

Intermediaries are mostly funded by HMCTS, with no charges or payments required by legal representatives.

How to book an intermediary

- 1 Refer online.** Refer your client for an assessment through [our online portal](#) (5 minutes).
- 2 Funding.** We send a quote for you to send to Legal Aid / HMCTS to approve (24 hours).
- 3 Book assessment.** Once funding is approved, please let us know. We will schedule an assessment (2-6 weeks).
- 4 Assessment will take up to 3 hours** and can be conducted in person or remotely. You will then receive a report (7 days).
- 5 Book dates** for hearings or conferences. We will send you booking forms to be signed by the court. Once signed, we will book the intermediary.