

SCHIZO-AFFECTIVE DISORDER IS PUZZLING

Little has been written about schizo-affective disorder. It is classified as a subtype of schizophrenia, but patients with the disorder may have difficulty identifying with the more regressed schizophrenic patient.

The delusions, hallucinations, disordered thinking and paranoid fears are much like schizophrenia and fairly easily treated with the same medications. However, in schizo-affective disorder there is also the presence at times of an affective disorder--mostly depression. The patient feels no motivation to do anything or even get out of bed. There is no pleasure in anything and there may be suicidal thoughts. The depression also needs to be treated with medication but seems at times to respond less well.

My schizo-affective patients often struggle with their depression and can become quite discouraged, though generally the disorder is thought to have a better prognosis than in typical schizophrenia.

There is a group for schizo-affective disorder at the Self Help Center that is led by patients and is a good source of support as patients share their experiences. This disorder can be debilitating, and patients may grieve the loss of their former careers and lives.

More information for patients and their families is necessary. These patients may look all right to their families, but experience much disturbance in their head that they may hide from their closest associates -- even from their doctors. Families need to understand the depression, which looks like laziness.

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Schizo-affective disorder is a mental illness where there are signs of depression or mania and also some signs or symptoms of schizophrenia. Also, the disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (for example, a drug of abuse or a medication) or a general medical condition. I feel that there are very effective treatments for schizo-affective disorder that usually include a combination of psychotherapy and psychiatric medication.

The psychiatric medications are aimed to treat the patient's depression or mania, as well as the patient's psychotic symptoms, if they are present. Psychiatric medication can be very effective in helping the patient function better and benefit more from psychotherapy, if the patient is receiving psychotherapy.

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Diagnosis: Some psychiatric disorders are very difficult to diagnose accurately. One of the most confusing conditions is schizo-affective disorder.

For more information, read Overcoming Depression by Dimitri F. Papolos, M.D., and Janice Papolos; and Manic-Depressive Illness by Frederick K. Goodwin, M.D. and Kay Redfield Jamison, Ph.D. Both books are available in our library.

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