

Holistic Healing and Hearing Voices: Self-Care for Patients with Schizophrenia

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Abstract

Schizophrenia is one of the more severe mental illnesses which poses immense costs to societies and patients. Worldwide it is believed that about 52 million individuals suffer from this illness. Treatment options have vastly improved, but more is still possible. As patients often struggle with social and professional goals and their physical health, what is suggested here are additional holistic health approaches, life skills tips, and spiritual approaches to overcome the limitations posed through this illness as much as possible.

Keywords: Schizophrenia; Holistic; Healing; Hearing Voices

Introduction

Schizophrenia is one of the more severe mental illnesses with immense costs for society and patients. Worldwide, 52 million individuals are affected [1]. Many patients, often mainly treated with neuroleptics and sometimes psychological therapies (analytic in the US, CBT in Europe), do not achieve their full potential in life, many do not recover fully. While optimistic studies claim that up to 54% recover completely and 60% make significant improvements [2], many patients remain unemployed, needing an intense support network, and die decades earlier than their healthy counterparts [1,3]. Hence, there is a need to look into additional, complementary strategies towards achieving better health, better psychiatric outcomes, and increased lifespan and life quality. Research in this area is not vast, some self-help publications do exist (for example Torrey 2013), but more is needed. The following discussion is based on 10 years research and personal experience of various alternative health and lifestyle interventions. A comprehensive (self)-care approach for schizophrenia needs to be holistic, must include interventions to promote health, increase life skills, and involve spirituality.

Holistic: Similar to other illnesses, holistic approaches should work better than singular approaches. For example, diabetes treated with insulin only will not develop as well as if a holistic approach is applied which also includes diet and exercise. Heart problems that are only dealt with medications or operations will not have an as good prognosis as if they are tackled also with lifestyle changes, nutritional interventions, stress management etc. The list could be continued.

Psychology and life skills: Schizophrenia often starts in early adulthood. Patients often don't have much life experience and often lack from there on the same opportunities for developing life skills that other people have, in particular if they have to give up opportunities due to their illness and experience social isolation. In addition, it is increasingly thought that schizophrenia is caused by trauma [4]. The more it is necessary to try to learn as many life and coping skills as possible for making life as acceptable as it can be to patients.

Spirituality: 'Madness' has a long tradition of being connected to spirituality in the literature [5,6], from the Bible and the Quran [7], to today's writings about 'spiritual emergencies' [8], Buddhism [9], and the New Age literature. Therefore, spiritual approaches of all sorts have answers developed over many millennia to help patients.

The below is not an argument against medication, which is often necessary, in particular in emergencies. However, as medications can only relieve the symptoms but not heal this illness, and also often produce unwanted side effects, further research is needed to show potential ways towards healing. The goal of healing should be to become medication free. The below approaches are hoped to bring some benefit in this respect. These suggestions, while many of them are not at all unusual but common sense, are thought to be important in particular for new patients, who often are in their early adult years and hence often naturally lack knowledge both about general as well as diagnosis specific skills. Some essential specialist advice, developed both in the orthomolecular medicine approach and foreign medical traditions, is also discussed.

Apples and Angels: From What You Eat to What You Believe

Diet

Some studies have looked into the most beneficial diet for people with schizophrenia. One study found evidence that a gluten and milk free diet helped cure at least one woman from her symptoms [10,11]. Another study found that the percentage of schizophrenia patients is higher amongst celiacs. The connection between gluten and dairy and schizophrenia is mentioned often on the internet as a possible focus point of dietary intervention. Interventions with a dairy and gluten free diets in hospitals showed however that not everyone needs it or benefits from it, even though it is also not harmful [12].

However, it is also known that generally patients with schizophrenia suffer poor physical health. Major problems are obesity, heart disease, diabetes, also cancer [13]. Interestingly, on the other hand, some studies have found that lung cancer rates are reduced in schizophrenics, even if they smoke heavier, the reason for which is not known [14]. Diets that are thought most beneficial against these diseases are the pescetarian, vegetarian or even vegan diets [15]. They are thought to increase longevity and health overall [16], which is often severely reduced in patients. In addition, they might aid recovery in themselves: One lady with chronic schizophrenia manages her illness very well through a raw vegan diet [17].

Specific medicinal diets, such as Ayurveda, have developed certain approaches towards various, also mental, illnesses [18]. For schizophrenia, the explanation is commonly found in toxicity, and specific herbs and sometimes a reduction in meat and coffee are recommended [19,20].

Finally, fasting as a both spiritual and dietary intervention could bring some benefit: Fasting has been applied in Russia to treat schizophrenia with good results [21] and in healthy people is often used to reduce toxins in the body and promote better overall health, as well as for spiritual advancement [22,23], goals which both should also be beneficial for patients with schizophrenia (compare the section on vitamins and spirituality).

Drinks

Coffee is a major issue with people with schizophrenia who often abuse it severely [3]. It has been speculated that coffee counters the effects of the newer medications and hence serves as a self-medication tool. Interventions in hospitals with decaffeinated coffee have shown sometimes good, sometimes mixed or no results [24-26]. However, it is established that increased coffee consumption can lead to anxiety and confusion [27], symptoms which can contribute and intensify schizophrenia symptomatology, such as paranoia, anxiety and mental disturbances. Hence, a restriction or at least temporary abstinence in times of increased symptoms might be beneficial. Decaffeinated coffee might be a valuable alternative, as well as herbal teas, juices etc. It must be mentioned here that caffeine can contribute to increased dopamine production, and dopamine excess is thought to be responsible for schizophrenia symptoms.

Polydipsia (drinking large amounts of liquids) is a common side effect of medication. Combined with a preference for coffee or other stimulating drinks, this can potentially lead to problems. It is possible that polydipsia resembles an unconscious attempt to 'flush' the medication or other toxins out of the body. Little can be done against it apart from change or reduction in medication, and an intake of mainly healthy, not anxiety or weight increasing or dependency forming fluids, as well as possibly the use of Vitamin C as a detoxification agent.

Alcohol consumption is a major problem in many people with schizophrenia, dependency is a common secondary diagnosis [28]. Often, it results out of attempts to self-medicate against depression, anxiety etc. If this occurs, the usual recovery methods (12 step programmes as developed by Alcoholics Anonymous) are likely to be of best use. But it is also important to deal with the underlying causes, hence to address anxiety, possibly boredom and depression in a holistic way. Supplements, such as B vitamins, 5HTP and Magnesium, are also thought useful.

Herbal teas are a beneficial tonic for schizophrenia, as for anyone else. Some herbal teas have specific effects which can help reduce anxiety or paranoia in patients. Chamomile, for example, is sometimes recommended for its calming effect. Many other herbal teas have a wide variety of beneficial effects [29,30].

Fruit juices are a great way of increasing vitamin intake, in particular if they are fresh. Juicing can also be done as a juice fast of between one day to one or two weeks duration for the more experienced. It is believed to be beneficial and detoxifying.

Drugs

Smoking is a major problem in patients, about 90% are smokers [3]. Nicotine replacement therapies and new safer nicotine delivery systems (E-Cigarettes) can reduce associated risks if stopping nicotine is not achieved. It is possible, given the high amount of smokers amongst patients, while in the general population only 30% smoke, that nicotine plays a role in the development of the symptoms [4,31-34]. Tobacco had been introduced in Europe before the time when 'madness' became more common, the former in the 17th century the latter after 1750 [35]. The same applies to coffee. In particular tobacco had allegedly previously been used by 'shamans' to induce trance like visionary states. After tobacco became more widely used in Europe, the numbers of 'mad' people increased. When it was introduced to India, the same happened there, first in the upper classes, who probably had access to foreign products first, then in the lower classes. Schizophrenia today affects more the lower classes where smoking is more common [4]. Furthermore, nicotine is thought to increase dopamine [36] and possibly contribute to over methylation (see section on vitamins), hence it probably can contribute to 'hearing voices'.

Other drugs should be avoided, or stopped if they are taken. Similar effects are possible, in particular cannabis abuse has been in the past mentioned as a risk factor for developing schizophrenia later in life. The use of drugs generally is not recommended with this illness, as it is also not for healthy people.

Vitamins

The orthomolecular approach towards schizophrenia had been developed by Abram Hoffer [37] and is promoted today by various practitioners, such as Eva Edelman [38], Patrick Holford [39], the Mensah Clinic and others. It claims to be the most successful intervention available as, according to Hoffer, up to 90% of patients make a full recovery if this approach is followed over many years.

The essence of this approach is to use very high levels of vitamins (in several grams per vitamin per day) and other supplements to correct suspected biochemical imbalances: Vitamin C, Zinc, Niacin (vitamin B3) and Omega 3 are most commonly recommended for hearing voices [40]. The use of Omega 3 for preventing psychosis is by now even accepted with major mainstream psychiatric institutions [1]. The B vitamins, not only Niacin, are also of importance. The connection can probably be found in the fact that coffee depletes vitamin Bs in the plasma [41], which are important for energy and nerve function. Vitamin C, on the other hand, is depleted by nicotine consumption [42].

The science behind the orthomolecular approach is not yet fully understood. One explanation is that over methylation contributes to 'voices' and undermethylation can contribute to other symptoms of schizophrenia [38,43]. Some additional research points to pH levels as related to mental illness [44]. Methylation can be influenced by lifestyle choices, such as coffee, nicotine and meat consumption (see above) and likely responds positively to increases in health promoting behaviours, diets and supplements. For a very detailed list of possible factors, see Edelman [38]. Further possible explanations might be found when analysing the neurological effects of both lifestyle

and dietary factors as well as vitamins and supplements. For example, Omega 3 as beneficial for brain health has been discussed in Horrobin [45] and its usefulness has been known for generations (it had been used in the post-WW2 period already). The use of vitamin C is multifold, its cancer preventing properties have been discovered by Linus Pauling [46], a Nobel Prize winner, it is thought harmless and health promoting in a variety of additional ways, and potentially it can help detoxify the body, blood and brain, which could help against toxin overload, overmethylation and hence voices. Niacin does possibly chemically resemble nicotine to some degree, the similarity in the names may not be a coincidence (Niacin is also called nicotinic acid). However, Niacin is not thought to be harmful, and hence can possibly serve as a safe replacement for nicotine. Its use for treating addictions, both to alcohol and nicotine, are discussed in some of the literature on orthomolecular medicine.

Further supplements that have been identified as beneficial can help increase serotonin or reduce dopamine, the essential mechanism and effect that is required for paranoid schizophrenia patients in particular. Amongst them count, for example, 5 HTP, and various herbs, such as Brahmi, Valerian, Ginseng, Liquorice, Rauwolfia.

Exercise

Generally physical activity is thought essential and beneficial for everyone. It can help to reduce stress and hence dopamine, and increases serotonin [47,48]. Also, it helps to keep the risk of developing many of the other common illnesses common with schizophrenia at bay, such as overweight, depression, diabetes and heart disease. Recommended are at least 30 minutes per day on as many days as possible.

Social Skills

Isolation is a major factor contributing to the development of the illness as well as present in the later course. Isolation can increase anxiety, and it is often due to conflict, trauma, poverty or migration [4]. Good social skills are essential for anyone experiencing these. They can be learned through exposing oneself to social contacts, reading about relationship advice, therapeutic consultations, etc [49]. Generally, social skills probably increase with age due to increased life skills and 'wisdom'. Spiritual practices might help increase social skills, because many religions and spiritual approaches are focused specifically on this aspect. Buddhism, for example, promotes kindness, harmlessness, patience, introspection and reflection, anger management and service orientation as key spiritual development goals [50], similar to many other religions. Most spiritual approaches have a common set of advice for interpersonal conduct [51,52], hence it is not necessary to recommend any specific approach. Also, spirituality might bring one in contact with other like minded people, hence create social connections and often community. In addition, many spiritual communities are relatively tolerant towards the 'disabled' and also might accept alternative interpretations of symptoms more easily, such as 'visions' or 'voices', which have a long standing tradition in many spiritual disciplines.

Psychology

For proper self-care, meditation and self-soothing behaviours – listening to music, taking baths etc. – are good tools to reduce stress, hence dopamine, voices, and anxiety or paranoia. All sorts of alternative therapies, from Chinese medicine to Reiki to past life regression, have sometimes been used and found beneficial by patients [9].

Activities - from reading, to socialising, to exercise, to work – are good for increasing motivation, mental alertness, and ultimately happiness. Motivation can also be increased through the use of positive thinking, mantras, daydreaming, etc. Self-confidence is important to maintain motivation and avoid depression, and the literature on how this can be improved is vast and widely available [9].

For periods of anger and frustration, acceptance and developing critical skills towards, for example, negative voices - which are often at the root of as well as maybe a result of anger for patients – might be beneficial. While it should be the goal to become free of negative voices, if they occur it is beneficial to apply conscious and critical skills towards them, such as avoiding negative emotional responses or spontaneous irrational actions, maintaining calm, etc. This can be practiced and becomes easier with time.

Life skills

Migration, poverty and isolation, discrimination, and other traumata can contribute to mental illness, in particular schizophrenia [4]. When they cannot be avoided, creative ways of dealing with these life challenges are needed: migration and isolation can be adapted to with making new connections and seek to overcome loneliness, and by maintaining distance connections for example by use of the internet; poverty can be countered by efforts towards employment, which is not impossible for patients with schizophrenia. Many patients do work, contrary to a common belief (cf. personal communications, informal surveys on Facebook, several autobiographies of patients, and some lists of prominent professionals with schizophrenia that are to be found on the internet). Education is also important and there are many cases of patients who succeed very well in education. Overall, patients with schizophrenia are often highly creative, maybe partially due to their symptoms, this makes them ideal for artistic professions or any professions in which creativity is highly valued, such as the arts, music, theatre, writing professions, academia, etc [5]. Many known professionals with the diagnosis work in these professions, but also other professions are possible, such as sport or IT or engineering for example. Working in psychiatry or psychology seems especially popular with patients. Creativity generally is probably beneficial even if it is not pursued professionally, as it can be therapeutic in itself in any form – from writing to painting to music etc. - and its products are often of value to society. On the other hand, often patients need to work on discipline, such as keeping work hours, tidiness, good manners, social skills etc. But these things can be learned and are worth the effort. Many of these things are challenges for healthy people likewise.

Spirituality

Schizophrenia has a very long history of being thought a spiritual problem [5], is sometimes called ‘spiritual emergency’ [8], in many cultures still understood and treated as a spiritual problem, and many delusions have spiritual content. Also, parapsychological explanations, for example understanding ‘voices’ as telepathy or spirit communication, are possible. For a more detailed discussion see Theory of Telepathy [9]. Religiousness is high amongst patients. Hence, spirituality – broadly understood - might be important for patients. The above interventions – vegetarian diets [53], social skills [54], etc. - are all recommended in many spiritual approaches. In addition to this, the adoption of spirituality and spiritual practice might help patients to maintain hope and create meaning in their lives. Some former patients even claim they have achieved their recovery due to spirituality only, such as intensive Christian prayer or the application of alternative spiritual practices [9].

For illustrating this, in the following, I present the results from a small informal survey on recovery and how it was achieved with 18 respondents, conducted in early 2017 on Facebook:

From those who responded that they had fully recovered with ‘yes’ and had recovered for 10 or more years (3), two had used for their recovery only spirituality and no medication and one had used only or mainly medication, but was also spiritual. One who had fully recovered for about 5 years used mainly medication and one who had fully recovered for about 3 years used mainly talking therapies. Mindfulness was also mentioned as helpful from the fully recovered. The rest said they had recovered only ‘somewhat’ or not at all. The spiritual approaches mentioned overall included Christianity, Buddhism and Islam and Shamanism. The recovered used Christianity and Islam and also Buddhism. Diet and nutritional adaptations seemed relatively important: one fully recovered used fasting and another fully recovered one was a vegan and another one used Omega 3. Opposed to this, someone who followed the Atkins diet did not do very well and indicated he had ‘not recovered’. Most respondents overall used a healthy standard diet. Sport was important to most, both fully and somewhat recovered, mainly walking and hiking.

Conclusion

It is necessary to promote knowledge about holistic self-care for patients with schizophrenia. Such advice is direly needed, but often lacking, both in the medical services, as well as in the self-help literature. In the UK, for example, many improvements have been made for example with Hearing Voices groups (peer support) [55], lifestyle interventions promoted by the NHS, a specialised orthomolecular clinic

in existence [56] and local recovery colleges (Recovery College Hull, Ron Coleman's Recovery College), for example. Given that schizophrenia could possibly be significantly increased or even caused by wrong lifestyle choices (such as smoking, stimulant abuse, and poor diets, for example) combined probably with a lack of social skills and lifestyle skills in coping with trauma and isolation, advise on these are important additional tools to overcome this illness and recover. Most patients are in their early adult years at first diagnosis, when the above behaviours and lack of skills are natural. The more so, advise on overcoming these is essential for treatment towards to goal of recovery. Future research along these lines should take possible cultural differences across the globe also into account [57-71].

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