What about suicide?

Suicide is a real risk for people with schizophrenia. The suicide rate among people with schizophrenia is ten times higher than among the general population.

Suicide sometimes happens during a psychotic episode. There is also a higher risk of suicide after discharge from hospital, when the person may not be fully stabilized.

Who is most at risk of suicide?
- People who have tried to commit suicide before.
- People who have thoughts of suicide, or who are preoccupied with death.
- Young men who have frequent relapses of their illness.
- People with schizophrenia who are aware of how the illness limits them.
- People who are depressed, or who have strong feelings of hopelessness.
- People with a history of substance abuse.

What are the warning signs of suicide?
- A previous suicide attempt.
- Talking or writing about suicide.
- Depression, or sudden calmness.
- Hearing voices that talk about doing something dangerous.
- Getting one’s affairs in order.

What can families do?
- Be alert to the warning signs of suicide.
- Don’t keep weapons in your house.
- If your family member has thoughts of suicide, talk about them.
- Contact a doctor or other health care professional immediately if your loved one is talking about or attempts suicide.

Where can we go for help?

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is here to help. We’re a family-based organization that understands what it’s like to live with schizophrenia. Our objectives are to:

- Provide family support and education
- Promote public awareness and understanding
- Advocate for better legislation and services for people with schizophrenia
- Promote research into the causes, treatment and cure of schizophrenia

“to alleviate the suffering caused by schizophrenia”

For further information, please contact us at:

Schizophrenia Society of Ontario
130 Spadina Ave, Suite 302
Toronto ON M5V 2L4
Phone: 416-449-6830
Toll Free: 1-800-449-6367
Fax: 416-449-8434
E-mail: sso@schizophrenia.on.ca
Website: www.schizophrenia.on.ca

This information should not be used as a substitute for the advice of a professional. Consult a physician or a lawyer to discuss your individual facts and circumstances.

What to do in a crisis

For more information and support, call:

Schizophrenia Society of Ontario
1-866-449-6363

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How do I recognize a crisis?

Schizophrenia is a brain disease that has many different symptoms. People with schizophrenia may have trouble thinking logically; they may behave in strange ways, or they may have emotional responses that seem odd.

People with schizophrenia sometimes have "psychotic episodes," where they can't tell what is real and what is not real. During these episodes, they may have hallucinations or hear voices. They may become agitated and hostile, thinking that they or someone they love is at risk of being harmed. These episodes can come on slowly or all of a sudden.

A psychotic episode is frightening, both for the person experiencing it and those around them. It is often referred to as a "crisis" situation.

Can I prevent a crisis?

Not all crisis situations can be prevented. But if you are caring for someone with schizophrenia, there are steps you can take to ensure you are prepared ahead of time:

- Learn to recognize signs that a crisis could occur. Watch their behaviour.
- Be alert to those things that could trigger a crisis, like not taking medication, use of street drugs or alcohol, or high stress situations.
- Develop an emergency plan.

During a crisis situation, the role of a caregiver is to:

- Try to stop the behaviour from getting worse.
- Protect your family member from harm.
- Keep yourself and those around you safe.
- Stay calm. Evaluate the situation: How urgent is it? What are the risks?

Develop an emergency plan

An emergency plan includes important phone numbers, contact names, and papers. As you develop a plan, you'll involve other family members, professionals, and your loved one. Here are some suggestions for getting started:

- Talk to a psychiatrist and a lawyer for advice on how to respond in a crisis.
- Find out what crisis support services are available in your community.
- Make a list of emergency phone numbers and keep it available. Include the names of friends and relatives who have agreed to help.
- Make an Emergency Information Form. This should include information about their medications, allergies, health card number, health care coverage, and the psychiatrist's name and phone number.
- Discuss what is to be done in a crisis with everyone who would be involved, including the person with schizophrenia.
- Talk about getting a "power of attorney for personal care." This is a legal document that allows another person to make important decisions on someone's behalf, such as decisions about health care.
- Learn about provincial laws on involuntary hospitalization. In Ontario, contact the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (www.gov.on.ca/health/index.html).

What if I am being threatened?

The most effective way to handle verbal or physical threats depends on your family member. Over time, you will learn what works best. Here are some suggestions:

- Speak softly, firmly, and clearly.
- Try not to argue or reason. Be reassuring. Say things that are not threatening like, "What do you think?" or "I don't know."
- If they make reasonable requests that don't put anyone in danger, try to go along with them.
- Allow them to have physical space. They may need more space than usual and may not want to be touched.
- Encourage them to sit down.
- Position yourself at an angle, rather than directly in front of them (a non-confrontational and non-threatening position). Avoid eye contact.
- Neither of you should be "cornered" in a room. Each of you should have a clear way out.
- Leave the situation. Go to another room, or leave the house.
- Ask a friend or family member for support.

Sometimes you won't be able to manage a crisis on your own. You will need professional help. At these times, it's important to get help as quickly as you can.

It's possible that your loved one may need to be hospitalized during a crisis.

When should I call the police?

If you think that your ill relative or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911.
- Stay calm. Your behaviour may affect how the police respond.
- Explain the situation over the phone. Tell the 911 operator that your relative has schizophrenia, needs medical help, and needs to get to a hospital. Describe what they are doing, and whether they are armed.
- When the police arrive, give them your Emergency Information Form. This information will be helpful if they have to take your loved one to the hospital.
- Write down all contact you have with the police, including their names.
- If you are asked to lay a charge against your family member, consult a lawyer first.

Sometimes a person with schizophrenia is so unpredictable or threatening that they disrupt the rest of the family or put other people at risk. In this case, the person may need to live in supervised housing away from the family.