

# Early detection is the key to dealing with mental health issues

THOMAS LYNCH

## MEN'S HEALTH MATTERS

When recovery is achieved sooner rather than later, everyday life keeps on track

**Q** A friend has recently been diagnosed as a schizophrenic. He thought that people were talking about him and he was also hearing voices. He has seen a psychiatrist and has had some treatment and is now thankfully a lot better.

I think that people are afraid to admit that they have problems, and if they were more aware of their mental health and sought help earlier they would be a lot better.

**A** Knowledge around mental health issues in Ireland still needs to improve, and vulnerable younger men are often least knowledgeable or prepared in handling such matters. Severe mental disorders, the psychoses, are especially taboo, engender often unwarranted fears and are most poorly understood, contributing to marked stigma and discrimination.

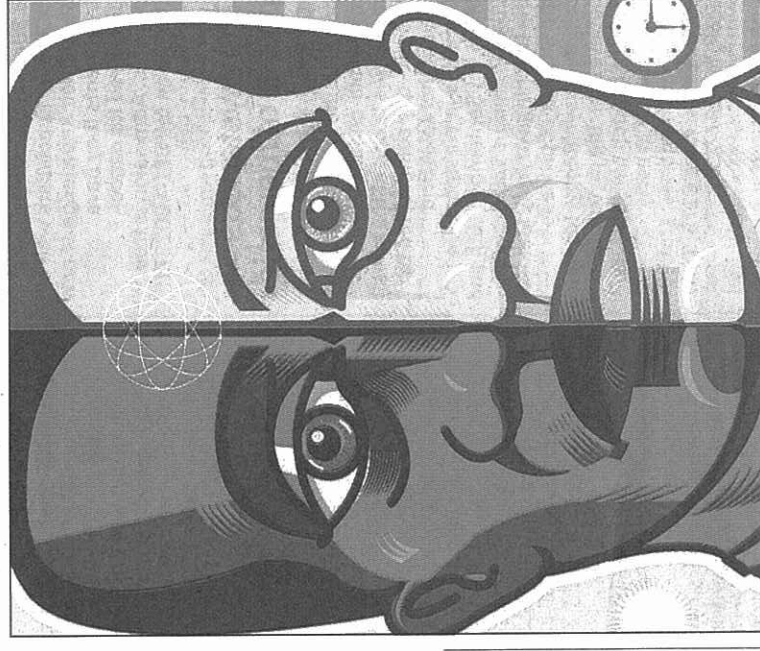
While a leading global cause of disability, most severe mental disorders reach help late, or are under-treated, and this compounds their negative personal impact. This is despite the significant improvements in contemporary understanding and care for these conditions, and even more grounds for optimism as these continuously develop.

Schizophrenia, a condition that develops in one out of every 100 people, affects more men than women. For every 100 new cases identified, about 66 of those will be men, usually beginning under the age of 25.

A simplified guide to know when to go for help is "Think of ABCD" - A for "auditory hallucinations" or hearing voices; B for "beliefs of other people knowing your private thoughts", C for "conviction of control by outside forces" and D for "delusions" - intense false beliefs that are logically contradictory.

Don't jump to conclusions, however, as several other conditions mimic these symptoms. Check out [www.detect.ie](http://www.detect.ie) as a good starting point or [www.shine.ie](http://www.shine.ie) for further information and resources.

However, at odds with reality, psychoses arrive by stealth and become quickly rationalised into one's psyche. Many affected are unaware of their situation, often being the last to know. Alcohol and substance misuse become a chaotic and failed resort to



escape mental confusion and turbulence. Naturally, additional fear causes delay in seeking help, but if you recognise any of these indications in yourself, even to a minor extent, it is important to get advice as soon as possible from your GP.

If you are concerned about someone who is unaware of these changes in their mind, sympathetic and persistent encouragement to seek advice is often worthwhile and effective.

For information on helping those opposed to help but clearly in need of it, see the Mental Health Commission booklet available from [www.mhcirl.ie/Mental\\_Health\\_Act\\_2001/Service\\_User\\_Information/](http://www.mhcirl.ie/Mental_Health_Act_2001/Service_User_Information/)

We must personally and structurally invest in preserving that precious core of wellbeing, good mental health. For this year's Men's Health Week, the College of Psychiatry of Ireland highlighted the benefits of early treatment for schizophrenia.

Firstly, early referral to the appropriate secondary care mental health professional or service can be promptly arranged. This is key, as we know that early detection leads to a greatly reduced likelihood of hospitalisation, as much treatment can be delivered through local outpatient clinics.

Early effective treatment contains any deterioration in work or college performance that would otherwise arise. Crucially, where recovery is achieved sooner rather than later, everyday life keeps on track, preserving relationships and promoting work stability and social integration.

Networks of support by peers similarly affected will increasingly grow in importance, promoting greater autonomy and responsibility in managing the condition.

As treatments evolve and improve, and with earlier intervention, the dismal outcomes of the past should

increasingly recede.

**Q** I am 49 years old and have just had a general check-up with my doctor. He has checked my bloods, including a PSA test. What if the screening test results show an elevated PSA level?

**A** You should discuss elevated PSA (prostate specific antigen blood test for the prostate) results with your GP. There can be different reasons for an elevated PSA level, including prostate cancer, benign prostate enlargement, inflammation, infection and race.

If your PSA level is high on a single test or has been increasing over time, or if a suspicious lump is detected during the DRE (digital rectal examination of the prostate), your doctor may recommend other tests to determine if there is cancer or another problem in the prostate. A urine test may be used to see if you have a urinary tract infection or blood in your urine.

If no other symptoms suggest cancer, your doctor may recommend repeating the DRE and PSA tests regularly to watch for any changes. If cancer is suspected, a biopsy of the prostate will be required. This is performed with a local anaesthetic using an ultrasound probe to help guide the biopsy needles into the prostate gland.

Your doctor will be able to explain all of these details to you, but you must remember that the majority of men will have a normal PSA level and even if this is raised, a majority of this group will not have cancer when checked out.

■ This weekly column is edited by Thomas Lynch, consultant urological surgeon, St James's Hospital, Dublin, with a contribution from Dr. Justin Trophy, consultant psychiatrist. ■ Please send your questions to [healthsupplement@irishtimes.com](mailto:healthsupplement@irishtimes.com)