Study to help schizophrenics

“Of all mental illnesses, schizophrenia is probably the most misunderstood.”
Dr Emma Barkus

It is fitting that last week was Schizophrenia Awareness Week, since schizophrenia is probably the most poorly understood of all the mental health problems people can experience. Unfortunately some media contribute to the problem by often portraying people with schizophrenia in a misleading way, showing homeless, unkempt and often verbally or physically abusive men. Schizophrenia is also often confused with multiple personality disorder. In multiple personality disorder people have a number of separate identities, whereas in schizophrenia people have a clear sense of who they are, though they may be separated somewhat from reality.

People with schizophrenia can have symptoms like hallucinations (hearing or seeing things which are not there) and unusual beliefs which are fixed, very rigid and do not respond well to being challenged (known as delusions). People with schizophrenia may also have problems in the logic, organisation and ownership of their thoughts, as well as in more central thinking processes - such as being able to focus and hold information in mind. These symptoms all impact on their ability to engage in day-to-day activities, work and/or study.

The first symptoms often appear in late adolescence, and sadly, most people who develop schizophrenia continue to have problems for the rest of their lives. Often there are signs leading up to the illness, however they are not specific and can sometimes appear like normal teenage behaviour.

In the Illawarra, as all over the world, schizophrenia affects about one in every hundred people, with all ethnic and socioeconomic groups and both genders being affected. Although we know that schizophrenia tends to run in families, many people who develop schizophrenia do not have an immediate family member with the illness. This makes it difficult to tell how schizophrenia is inherited. Current opinion is that susceptibility to schizophrenia is caused by a combination of biological (including genetic) and environmental factors.

We know that major stressors - such as living in a big city, moving to a new country and other big life events - can trigger schizophrenia. Experts are undecided about the role of alcohol and drugs in causing schizophrenia, and this is controversial area. Existing evidence suggests that excessive use, or starting regular drug or alcohol use at a young age, is not good for long term mental health and can lead to many problems, not just schizophrenia. It seems that there are some people who carry a vulnerability to schizophrenia that makes them particularly sensitive to the negative consequences of stress, alcohol and drugs.

Local research being carried out by the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI) is trying to identify people who are particularly susceptible to developing schizophrenia. In one study, the experiences people have when smoking cannabis are being examined. Some young people (who we may be able to identify by their personality) seem particularly sensitive to the negative mental effects of this drug. If we can better understand and describe these negative effects, those who experience them will be able to recognise them and realize why it may be in their best interests to stop using cannabis.

In the Illawarra, we are fortunate to have a number of places young people can go if they are experiencing mental health difficulties. These include ‘Headspace’ (www.headspace.org.au) and early intervention services run by the local health authorities. My hope is that through research, we can provide people with information they can use to protect their own mental health, before they develop a need for such clinics.

Dr Emma Barkus is a lecturer in psychology at the University of Wollongong and a member of the ‘neuroscience and mental health’ theme of the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI).