

What to do if your ill family member won't accept treatment

Source: <http://www.schizophrenia.com>

According to schizophrenia expert Dr. E. Fuller Torrey ("Surviving Schizophrenia" 4th ed, p. 295), there are several reasons that people with mental illnesses refuse or stop treatment (also known as "medication noncompliance). These reasons include:

- _ Lack of insight into the illness (also called anosognosia - a biological symptom of the disease)
- _ Denial (a psychological issue - person is aware of illness but wishes not to be ill)
- _ Medication side-effects
- _ Poor doctor-patient relationship
- _ Delusional beliefs about medication (e.g., that it is poison)
- _ Cognitive deficits, confusion, disorganization
- _ Fears of becoming medication-dependent or addicted

Some of these reasons are easier to deal with than others; for example, you always have the option of finding a better doctor, or adjusting medications to reduce side effects. Providing the patient with information about their illness (the benefits of medication, the long-term prognosis, etc) has been shown to improve compliance. Simplifying the treatment regimen with single daily doses, use of compartmentalized pill containers, long-acting injections, etc. can also help.

Unfortunately, one of the most difficult reasons for medication noncompliance is also one of the most common - statistics estimate that 40% of schizophrenia patients lack insight into their own illness as a symptom of the disease. Such anosognosia makes an enemy of anyone who tries to convince them otherwise. There is sometimes no way to force compliance without long and upsetting battles with your loved one. However, medication is currently the best tool we have to control psychotic symptoms and improve patient insight. Many members of schizophrenia.com have indicated on the discussion boards that living with schizophrenia is difficult enough *with* medication; without it, it's downright impossible.

You do have options available to you. Assisted Treatment is a benign term for an extremely difficult task - to help (or 'assist') a loved one with their treatment because they are unwilling or unable to take care of themselves. Assisted treatment options may include benevolent coercion, obtaining conservatorship or guardianship, conditional release, outpatient commitment, or involuntary commitment. The Treatment Advocacy Center website has excellent information and resources on assisted treatment – see <http://www.psychlaws.org/BriefingPapers/BP3.htm> for more information.

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A less extreme technique suggested by other schizophrenia.com members is to ask your loved one to try the medication for a specific period of time. Hopefully, once the medication starts to take effect, the person will begin to regain some rational thinking skills, and you start to talk reasonably together about the benefits of long-term treatment. However, make sure you give the medication enough time to work - it can be at least 1-2 weeks before any improvement is noticed, and many antipsychotic medications don't take full effect for weeks or months.

Others at schizophrenia.com have come to the extremely difficult point of offering their loved one an ultimatum - either get treatment and stay med compliant, or someone is going to leave (either you, or the patient). Another similar method of coercion is to stop supporting your relative financially unless they agree to treatment. There is no way to know or guarantee the results of such an ultimatum, so consider carefully if you are willing and able to follow through with your threat. It will only work if you are committed to carrying out your words. Also consider carefully your own safety and the safety of your family before making such a threat, since the illness can make some people behave unpredictably or violently, even against someone they love.

For more ideas and resources for dealing with the difficult subject of treatment compliance, many schizophrenia.com family members recommend the following book:

--"[I am Not Sick! I Don't Need Help](#)" - a book by Xavier Amador on helping the seriously mentally ill accept treatment. Highly recommended by schizophrenia.com members.

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