

Misunderstood: living with paranoid schizophrenia

Written by Jes-c Brandt



□□ Dan Goddard wears his usual dark hat and glasses as he rides his scooter around Holyoke, but there's more to this resident than meets the eye.□□ —Enterprise photo

It's not unusual to see this man, clad in a dark hat and sunglasses, riding around the city of Holyoke on his scooter. His name is Dan Goddard, and he has been living with paranoid schizophrenia for most of his life.

Paranoid schizophrenia is a mental illness in which an individual interprets reality abnormally. Often delusions and hallucinations are present and can hinder normal functioning. Despite all the inherent mental and physical difficulties when dealing with paranoid schizophrenia, Goddard says the hardest thing to handle is being mistreated by others.

Schizophrenia is an illness that is not fully understood. Goddard noted that even in his lifetime he has seen changes in the medical field's understanding of the illness, but the general public still doesn't know what it means to be diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia.

People tend to have many misconceptions about schizophrenia. When new acquaintances find out he has schizophrenia, Goddard explained, they often assume he has multiple personalities.

Misunderstood: living with paranoid schizophrenia

Written by Jes-c Brandt

Perhaps this misunderstanding stems from the word's Greek roots, or maybe Hollywood is to blame, but the fact remains, there is a general confusion between dissociative identity disorder and schizophrenia.

Goddard's story is rather typical of paranoid schizophrenia. He was about 20 years old when he first suspected there might be something wrong. His behavior just wasn't quite right, he said. For 10 years he lived with paranoid delusions and hallucinations before he was finally diagnosed at 30 years old.

He first went to the doctor because he suspected he might have cancer. It was then that he was sent to Denver to see a mental health specialist and was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia.

All Goddard's problems were not instantly solved with a diagnosis and medication. He continued to experience the effects of his mental illness for many years.

Paranoid delusions caused Goddard to think his house was bugged and that people were watching him everywhere he went. At times he blamed his neighbors and family members for the perceived conspiracies. As expected, this put a strain on his relationships, adding additional hardship to an already difficult experience.

It's hard for others to understand, Goddard said, that someone with schizophrenia cannot tell the difference between a hallucination and reality. When he had hallucinations of people breaking into a room to come after him, they seemed as real as any actual person.

As many sufferers of mental illnesses do, Goddard turned to smoking and drinking as a means of self-medication.

Finally, after many difficult years of delusions and hallucinations, doctors prescribed a different medication that greatly helped manage his symptoms. In addition to medication, Goddard began seeing therapist Shona Heim in Imperial, Neb. She has stood beside him, Goddard shared, through thick and thin.

Misunderstood: living with paranoid schizophrenia

Written by Jes-c Brandt

Since getting a handle on his mental illness, Goddard's life has made quite the turn around. Although he still suffers from some paranoia, it isn't nearly as bad as it used to be. He also noted he no longer feels the need to use smoking or drinking to deal with his condition.

Relationships have continued to play an important role in Goddard's improvement. Having lived in Holyoke for six years, he now has many friends in the community. Along with his new sense of control over his schizophrenia, Goddard has also turned to Christianity. He noted friendships with Pastor Gary Rahe and other members of Zion Lutheran Church offer great fellowship.

Outside the church, Goddard has found companionship with friends in his group at Centennial Mental Health and at Meet and Eat. His dog Honey is also a close friend and companion in his daily life.

Life still has its struggles, Goddard explained. A bad back has him using a scooter to get around, and one of the side effects of his medication is sensitivity to light, which explains his dark sunglasses.

Overcoming paranoid schizophrenia was a victorious accomplishment for Goddard. "I used to be embarrassed to talk about it," he said. But as his therapist explained to him, paranoid schizophrenia is an illness, and he has no more reason to be ashamed than a cancer patient.

Now he accepts his illness and speaks proudly about not allowing it to control his life. It is his wish that people would view him and other patients with mental illnesses as people, not defined by their illnesses.

There has long been a stigma associated with mental illness, and as Goddard pointed out, it's important to remember there is a physical cause for mental illnesses and there is no reason for ostracizing patients with schizophrenia or other disorders.