

Psychosocial Strategies Used by Individuals with Schizophrenia: An Analysis of Internet Forum Posts

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Abstract : Background: Schizophrenia is a severe chronic mental disorder that can result in hallucinations, delusions, reduced social engagement, and lack of motivation. While antipsychotic medications often provide the basis for treatment, psychosocial strategies complement the benefit of medications and can result in meaningful improvements in symptoms and functioning. The aim of the study was to investigate psychosocial strategies used by internet self-help forum participants to effectively manage symptoms caused by schizophrenia. Internet self-help forums are a resource for medical and psychological problems and are commonly used to share information about experiences with symptom management. Method: Three international self-help internet forums on schizophrenia were identified using a search engine. 1,181 threads regarding non-pharmacological, psychosocial self-management of schizophrenia symptoms underwent screening, resulting in the final identification and coding of 91 threads and 191 posts from 134 unique forum users that contained details on psychosocial strategies endorsed personally by users that allowed them to effectively manage symptoms of schizophrenia, including positive symptoms (e.g., auditory/visual/tactile hallucinations, delusions, paranoia), negative symptoms (e.g., avolition, apathy, anhedonia), symptoms of distress, and cognitive symptoms (e.g., memory loss). Results: Effective symptom management strategies personally endorsed by online forum users were psychological skills (e.g., re-focusing, mindfulness/meditation, reality checking; n = 94), engaging in activities (e.g., exercise, working/volunteering, hobbies; n = 84), social/familial support (n = 48), psychotherapy (n = 33), diet (n = 18), and religion/spirituality (n = 14). 44.4% of users reported using more than one strategy to manage their symptoms. The most common symptoms targeted and effectively managed, as specified by users, were positive symptoms (n = 113), negative symptoms (n = 17), distress (n = 8), and memory loss (n = 6). 10.5% of users reported more than one symptom effectively targeted. 70.2% of users with positive symptoms reported that psychological skills were effective for symptom relief. 88% of users with negative symptoms and 75% with distress symptoms reported that engaging in activities was effective. Discussion: Individuals with schizophrenia rely on a variety of different psychosocial methods to manage their symptoms. Different symptomology appears to be more effectively targeted by different types of psychosocial strategies. This may help to inform treatment strategy and tailored for individuals with schizophrenia.

Keywords : psychosocial treatment, qualitative methods, schizophrenia, symptom management

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