

Spouse finds support in caring for mentally ill husband

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Schizophrenia can occur anytime during a person's lifetime. The most common age, however, is in adolescence or early adulthood.

But sometimes this disorder doesn't surface until a person is in their 30s, when they are married and have a career.

For a spouse, the results can be particularly disconcerting as the individual who once was the pillar of support and love now is as needy as a child.

Yet with early intervention, proper treatment and the support of organizations, such as NAMI (The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill), spouses and other family members can cope and often support the loved one on their road to recovery.

Mary, the person featured in today's *Trentonian* article during Mental Health Awareness Week, is such a spouse.

Her husband didn't begin showing symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia until he was 38.

"My husband started progressively getting more paranoid ... He told me he was hearing voices," she said.

Their home was located in South Jersey across from Philadelphia Airport. There was a lot of background noise from low flying aircraft.

Mary's husband lacked the ability to filter out these annoying stimuli, a typical characteristic of schizophrenia.

His fears and hallucinations haunted him to the point that he started losing sleep, particularly given the annoying air traffic overhead.

"Every time a helicopter came overhead, he thought they were spying on him," she explained.

In time, he became afraid even to venture out of the house.

"He would ask me to go out and get the newspaper. He didn't want to go out himself," she said.

When the air traffic outside wasn't bothering him, the voices inside his head did.

Mary struggled to get inside his head, to try and understand what he was experiencing.

"He compared it to being interrogated," she said, remembering how he tried to describe "the voices" to her.

Mary probed for outside causes for her husband's problem, but much as she searched, there was



Mary's husband suffers from paranoid schizophrenia.

"no trauma or accident" in her his past which could explain the sudden onset of this illness.

Her husband joined in the search for an answer, but his explanations came from his psychosis.

"He got a filling at the dentist," Mary explained. "He believed they put a transmitter in him which was what put the voices in his head."

As the illness progressed — research shows that schizophrenia is a progressive disease — Mary's husband began to mistrust her.

"He thinks I'm part of the plot

against him," she said, expressing her frustration at being unable to reassure him she was there to support and not to undermine him.

His behavior became erratic.

"He asked for a divorce, then he reneged," she said.

Like many schizophrenics of this type, the wall of denial is reinforced by their own feelings of paranoia.

"He doesn't believe he's ill," she said, adding that he doesn't take any medication is not seeing any doctor or other mental health professional.

A heavy machine operator, Mary's husband lost his job. He was accepted for Social Security Disability Insurance.

He moved out recently but he continues to call his wife almost every day. Indeed, she is his only lifeline to help.

"I often feel like I am his mother, his counselor, his therapist, his psychiatrist ... but he will always be my friend," she said.

Meanwhile, Mary has found support through NAMI and other organizations.

"I know I never would have made it through this (without NAMI)," she said.