



**ONE BOOK  
ONE PHILADELPHIA**

# Unit Plan for The Soloist Grades 9-12

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*Additional resources can be found in the Resource Guide compiled by the Free Library.  
Questions, comments, etc. can be directed to the author of this lesson guide at  
[Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com](mailto:Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com)*

## Unit Outline

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

- When we help others, it transforms us as well as the people we are helping.
- Patience and perseverance are necessary for real change.
- There is no single way to measure happiness.
- Urban problems are systemic, not individual.

## Essential Questions

Students should be introduced to these key questions as they begin reading, and keep them in mind as they work through the book:

- **What does it take to make us happy in this world?**
- **Why do we help others? What do we gain from helping them? What do we risk losing?**
- **How can the mentally ill best be integrated into our society?**

These questions can be applied directly to the main characters in the book:

- **What does it take to make Ayers happy in this world? How about Lopez?**
- **Why does Lopez help Ayers? What does he gain from helping him? What does he lose?**
- **How does Lopez try to make Ayers a part of society?**

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions. Students are encouraged to ask these questions not only of the characters of the book, but of themselves.

## Suggested Resource Combos

Some suggested combinations of the resources in this guide:

### All-Class Reading

- Use the **Reader Response Questions** as reading quizzes and discussion prompts.
- Write one of the **Assessments** as an in-class activity.
- Have students complete the **Help Chart** activity and then use that to jump-start their **Essay** on "What Happens when We Help."

### Group Reading / Book Club

- Provide students with a list of the **Reader Response Questions** and have them make notes for meetings / discussions.
- Allow them to choose from the **Assessments** as their final work.

### Independent Reading

- Use the **Literary Logs** to help students engage with the text and prove that they have read.

# In-Class Introduction

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

**NOTE: As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing The Soloist to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.**

## 1. Opening Activity

- Students write down their answer to the expositional prompt: **Describe the last homeless person you saw in Philadelphia.**
- On the other side of their paper, they then respond to the creative prompt: **Describe the life you think this person lead before they became homeless.**
- Students can trade papers or share out loud in groups, and compare what kind of answers they gave. Questions to consider:
  - o How much have we seen vs. interacted with the homeless? What are our ideas about the homeless based on?
  - o Are students' answers similar? How are they different?
  - o Are any answers unrealistic, or attempting to be funny? Why does it feel acceptable or funny to make jokes about the homeless?

## 2. In-Class Reading

Read the **preface** aloud. Have students share what they think about this first impression of Nathaniel Ayers.

If the situation permits, have students read chapter one on their own. **Literary Log Worksheets** can be handed out at this time for them to track their responses to the reading.

## 3. Essay & Art Contests

Introduce the citywide **Essay Contest** and **Art Contest** hand out the flyers to any interested students. See the enclosed flyers for more information about the deadlines and submission process. There are cash prizes for the top three entries in each category, plus a chance to meet Steve Lopez at a One Book event in March.

The essay prompt can also be used as a final assessment if you are reading the entire book as a class.

## Essay Contest Details

Submissions due to teachers by February 6, 2009

**Eligibility:** This essay contest is open to any high school student attending a Philadelphia Public or Charter High School who has read the One Book, One Philadelphia selection, *The Soloist*.

### Contest Guidelines - Students

Interested students should complete the One Book, One Philadelphia Essay Contest Cover Sheet and respond to the following essay prompt:

*Helping someone benefits both the person who received the help and the person who gave the help. Take a close look at what happens when you go out of your way to help someone. It could be someone close to you, or a stranger. It could be a big task, or a small one. It could be an experience from your past, or something you set out to do tomorrow. It can even be about a time somebody helped you.*

*Now, tell the story of what happened. In what ways did the experience change you and also the other person involved in the experience? A simple success story is easy to share -- what is more interesting are the challenges, problems, and failures that happened along the way.*

Use the Writing PSSA Narrative and Conventions Scoring Guidelines to help you revise and edit your draft.

Type your essay, double-spaced, on one side of white 8 ½ by 11 inch paper(s).

Submit the final draft of your essay and the cover sheet to the teacher who introduced you to the One Book selection, *The Soloist*, on, or before, February 6, 2009.

Entries will be judged using the Writing PSSA Narrative and Conventions Scoring Guidelines. Winners will be announced by March 6, 2009.

A top winner from each participating school and their teacher will be invited to attend an awards ceremony with Steven Lopez on March 17, 2009 from 4:00 – 5:30 in the second floor auditorium of the Education Center at 440 N. Broad Street. Each school winner will receive an autographed copy of the Steven Lopez novel, *Third and Indiana* at the event.

Three top winners will read their award winning essays at the ceremony and will receive gift certificates in the amounts of:

Third Place Winner - \$25  
Second Place Winner - \$50  
First Place Winner - \$100

**Contest Guidelines – Teachers:** Collect all student essay entries with cover sheets by February 6, 2009. Submit the entries in the attached pony envelope addressed to: Vera Da Vinci, Office of College and Career Education, Education Center – 2nd Floor, 440 N. Broad Street by February 9, 2009.

## Art Contest Details

**Eligibility:** This art contest is open to any high school student attending a Philadelphia Public or Charter High School who has read the One Book, One Philadelphia selection, *The Soloist*.

**Deadline Date:** Submit art entries to Vera Da Vinci, Office of College and Career Education, Education Center – 2nd floor, 440 North Broad Street by February 9, 2009. Winners will be announced by March 6, 2009.

### Contest Guidelines

Interested students should complete the One Book, One Philadelphia Art Contest Cover Sheet and create an illustration based on the theme of “Homelessness.” “Homelessness is the condition and social category of people who lack housing, because they cannot afford, or are otherwise unable to maintain, regular, safe and adequate shelter.” Based on events and/or your personal response to the content of the book *The Soloist*, create a work that promotes public awareness of the homeless condition.

### Artwork

\* Students are encouraged to address the theme in their artwork in whatever manner they wish, though representational, stylized or abstract means of expression.

\* Any 2 dimensional medium may be employed; e.g. colored pencils, oil pastels, pen and ink, watercolor, tempera, mixed media, computer graphics.

\* Lettering is not permitted except as part of the composition.

\* Entries may not be larger than 22”x 28”.

\* All entries should include the name of the student, home address, telephone number, school name and teacher on the back of piece.

### Awards

An awards ceremony with author of *The Soloist*, Steven Lopez will be held on March 17, 2009 from 4:00 – 5:30 in the second floor auditorium of the Education Center at 440 N. Broad Street. Each student winner will receive an autographed copy of the Steven Lopez novel, *Third and Indiana* at the event. Three top winning student artists will have their work displayed at the ceremony and will receive gift certificates in the amounts of:

Third Place Winner - \$25  
Second Place Winner - \$50  
First Place Winner - \$100

## Reader Response Questions

A key idea or theme is touched on for each chapter. Reading can easily be grouped in chapters of three; the most central question for each section is printed in **bold type**.

Questions can be used as reading checks, writing prompts, or discussion starters.

### Preface – Chapter 2

**PREFACE** Lopez says that he “fishes” the city for inspiration for his writing, whereas Ayers stands near a statue of Beethoven for inspiration when playing music. What do these methods show about each person? **Is there an “effective” way to find inspiration? Where do you find inspiration for writing, music, or creative pursuits?**

1 Why doesn't Ayers trust Lopez when they first meet? What do you think it will take for Lopez to gain his trust?

2 How do Ayers' friends and relatives react when Lopez calls them? How would you react if you got the news that a long-lost friend or relative was homeless?

### Chapters 3 - 5

3 **By writing about him—and, by extension, making money off of him—does Lopez have responsibility for Ayers' well-being? And if so, how much?**

4 Describe the homeless people Ayers interacts with. What do you think about this community? What does Lopez think?

5 What would Ayers gain by living at LAMP? What would he lose?

### Chapters 6 – 8

6 Ragin works with his mentally ill patients to establish in “concrete ways” that they “have a life worth living.” **Does Ayers have a life worth living? If not, what does he need? How about in Lopez's life, or your own?**

7 What does his night on Skid Row trouble Lopez? Why doesn't it seem to trouble Ayers?

8 What is the purpose of this interlude? Why does Lopez choose to tell the story of Russo and Ayers without including himself as a character?

### Chapters 9 – 11

9 Ayers says that there were “none of [his] people” at Julliard. Who does he consider “his people”? Who do you consider your people, and how might it affect you if you were separated from them?

10 Do you think Alexis Rivera is exploiting Ayers by having him play in his club? How about Lopez having him meet with the doctors?

**11 To quote Lopez, do you think Ayers is “really any “ (88)? Would it be right to force a “gravely disabled” person like Ayers into treatment?**

### **Chapters 12 – 14**

**12 Why does Lopez cut out of his family responsibilities to help Ayers? Do you agree with his reasons?**

**13 Why is it so hard to solve the problem of Skid Row? Which approach is better—solving it top-down through the Mayor’s office, or helping one person at a time like Lopez?**

**14 Just as Lopez asks (126): **Is Ayers happy? Who knows best what is best for Ayers—himself, or Lopez?****

### **Chapters 15 – 17**

**15 Why does Ayers resist moving into the apartment?**

**16 Why does Lopez wait until now—halfway through the book—to tell us about Ayers’ childhood? How does this affect our understanding of Ayers?**

**17 Lopez believes that “Nathanial plays music that silences the voices in his head” (154). To what extent can music heal or help a person?**

### **Chapters 18 – 20**

**18 Why is Lopez so angry about what Mr. Ayers says about his son?**

**19 Why does Lopez ask for Ayers to give him music lessons? How might it change their relationship?**

**20 Why does Ayers ask about recording music or giving a recital? What does this show about him? Do you think these hopes are realistic?**

### **Chapters 21 – 23**

**21 Why did Ayers finally choose to stay overnight in his apartment? What reasons beyond the ones given in the book can you think of?**

**22 Is Lopez and Ayers’ relationship a friendship? Does it resemble any friendship you have had? How?**

**23 How does Lopez react to Ayers’ wish to have children of his own? Do you think his response was appropriate?**

### **Chapters 24 – 26**

**24 In Lopez’s own words: “Have I exploited [Ayers]? Is it possible for me to keep writing about him without doing so?” In what ways might Lopez be exploiting his friend? What would make their relationship equal?**

**25** Why does Lopez's attempt to help Ayers via Dr. Prchal fail so miserably?

**26** Why is there no record of Ayers' strange behavior in his school record at Julliard? Why might the school have ignored his problems?

### **Chapters 27-31**

**27** What triggers Ayers' outburst at Lopez? Has Lopez helped or harmed Ayers here?

**28** Lopez says, "I can't save [Ayers] and I don't have to keep trying" (246). Is Lopez justified in his decision? When can we stop trying to help somebody?

**29 / 30** How does Ayers feel about Yo-Yo Ma? What does this show about him?

**31** Does Lopez believe he has helped Ayers? What has Lopez learned about himself in the process of helping his friend?

## Literary Log Prompts

Students can use one or more of these prompts as a way to “log” their reading. This can be used as preparation for class, or as a way for students to keep track of their independent reading. Logs could be anything from a few notes to a few paragraphs.

### Impressions of Ayers

- For each reading assignment, log your impressions of Nathaniel Ayers. Name a specific moment (with page number) that influenced your opinion. If your opinion has changed since the last reading assignment, explain why.

### Lopez’s Effectiveness

- For each reading assignment, log what Lopez has done to try and help Ayers. Then explain whether you think it was effective or not, and why.

### How to Help

- Log each time there is a new character presenting a possible way to help Ayers. Then explain whether you think their plan will work, and why. *Note: this prompt will lead to fewer but more in-depth responses.*

Use the attached worksheets for either of the first two prompts. Students can also use the worksheet to keep track of reading assignments.

## Assessments

Teachers are strongly encouraged to assign the **Essay Contest Prompt** “what happens when we help” or the **Art Contest Prompt** on homelessness as their final assessment for the book. Additional assessment possibilities include:

- Write a literary comparison of Lopez’s novel and his columns – compare and contrast the “Man of the Streets, in Three Suites” column (in the back of this packet) with that section of the story as told in the book.
- Based on the different methods described in the book, create a plan to end homelessness in Philadelphia. Describe what, and how much, it would take.
- Write a letter to Ayers as one of his family members: his mother, father, or sister. What would their message be to him? Be sure to stay in character and use details from the book.
- Play devil’s advocate: Write a letter to Lopez to try and convince him that his work with Ayers *isn’t* meaningful, and that he should give it up.
- For a set period of time (could be a day, or a week) keep a “help chart.” (Use the attached worksheet.) Each time you help someone, make a note of what you did, what the result was, and how you felt about it. Students can share/compare charts, and also use it as a warm-up for the **Essay Contest**.









## Online Resources

### **Steve Lopez on Nathaniel Anthony Ayers – [www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com)**

The L.A. Times has a central page for Lopez's work on Ayers, which includes all of his original columns, several sets of photographs about Skid Row, and a brief but engaging video showing Ayers today.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/photography/la-me-lopez-skidrow-nathaniel-series,0,4154532.special>

Photo Essays from the L.A. Times

“Disabled and Dispossessed”

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/photography/la-me-lopez19oct19-pg,0,5776744.photogallery>

“Prostitution on Skid Row”

[http://www.latimes.com/news/local/photography/la-me-lopez17oct17\\_pg,0,5903261.photogallery](http://www.latimes.com/news/local/photography/la-me-lopez17oct17_pg,0,5903261.photogallery)

### **Steve Lopez Interviews**

Audio interview on NPR from April 2008 -

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89819987>

### **Homelessness in Philadelphia – [www.philly.com/inquirer](http://www.philly.com/inquirer)**

The Inquirer has regular articles and features about homelessness in Philadelphia.

Interactive feature: <http://www.philly.com/inquirer/multimedia/15853472.html>

Q&A with Sister Mary Scullion as the expert, mentioned in Chapter 5.

[http://www.philly.com/inquirer/ask/ask\\_Sister\\_Mary\\_Scullion.html](http://www.philly.com/inquirer/ask/ask_Sister_Mary_Scullion.html)

### **Project H.O.M.E. – [www.projecthome.org](http://www.projecthome.org)**

Philadelphia non-profit co-founded by Sister Mary Scullion and serving the homeless in Philadelphia since 1989.

About the founders: <http://www.projecthome.org/about/co-founders.php>

Volunteer: <http://www.projecthome.org/donate/volunteer.php>

Lamp Community - <http://www.lampcommunity.org/>

The website for the organization that provides housing and services for Ayers, and others living on Skid Row. Includes information about services, history, and a wish list asking for donations of goods.

### **National Alliance on Mental Illness - <http://www.nami.org/>**

Website of the organization Lopez attends a conference for (Chapter 11).

General fact page about Schizophrenia, which includes causes, symptoms, and treatments:

[http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By\\_Illness&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=54&ContentID=23036&Istid=327](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=54&ContentID=23036&Istid=327)

Special survey page about Schizophrenia, where students can test their knowledge:

<http://www.nami.org/sstemplate.cfm?section=SchizophreniaSurvey>

## Original Column: **Man of the Streets, in Three Suites**

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/photography/la-me-lopez4dec04,0,2946008.column>  
From the Los Angeles Times

Steve Lopez  
December 4, 2005

### First Suite: The Apartment

He's a lucky man, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers. At least in some ways. Despite the imagined voices and daily flutter of scattered thoughts, he has a burning passion.

For him, the city is an orchestra, a labyrinth of musical references and inspiration. He sees a swaying palm and hears a violin. A bus roars by and gives him a bass line. He hears footsteps and imagines Bach and Brahms.

"I can't survive," Nathaniel once told me, "if I can't hear Los Angeles the way I like to hear it."

That's why he doesn't want to give up sleeping on the streets. I've told him that if he'd be willing to move into an apartment, he would have the freedom to devote even more time to music. As it is, he lugs his belongings around in a shopping cart, tugging an anchor through the city. If he locked up his things, he could travel lighter, with just his fiddle or cello.

But Nathaniel can't see the advantages. After years on the streets, his schizophrenia untreated, he's at home outdoors in a world of his own making.

He needed a nudge.

The staffers at Lamp, the skid row agency that has been working with Nathaniel most of the year, helped me devise a plan in late October. A downtown apartment, complete with all the supportive services Nathaniel needs, had become available. At the same time, a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic had graciously offered to give Nathaniel cello lessons. Now if we could just get Nathaniel to see that the apartment would be the perfect location.

Thanks, Nathaniel said, but he'd rather have the lessons in the 2nd Street tunnel.

With all due respect, I told him, a member of a world-class orchestra might balk at the idea, even if Nathaniel had studied at Juilliard. In the end, he gave in.

As a warmup, I went to the apartment with Nathaniel, trying to get him comfortable there. The building is on a quiet street that seems miles from skid row, with a courtyard where bougainvillea flows over an arbor.

Nathaniel sat on a bench in the garden, took bow in hand and played Beethoven, followed by Bach. Several residents stopped to listen on their way through the courtyard, stunned, as people often are, at the bedraggled source of such refinement.

Let's go check out the room, I said when he broke. Maybe the acoustics are good.

The apartment was small, plain, perfect. Nathaniel liked the light that fell through the window, filtered by an oleander that scratched lightly at the screen.

He took a seat on the bed and played Schubert, and in the embrace of the music, eyes closed, he was home.

## Second Suite: The Lesson

Nathaniel was nervous about the encounter, worried he wasn't good enough to burn the time of a professional. So too was Peter Snyder. The cellist, a 33-year member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, couldn't know what he was in for.

"It so moved me that I simply have to do something," he had written to me after meeting Nathaniel at Disney Hall. The orchestra had invited Nathaniel to a rehearsal, and Snyder had felt a connection with him during a brief chat.

One Monday last month, I picked up Snyder at Disney and we drove down off the hill, through downtown and across to skid row, a six-minute trip across the universe. Nathaniel was waiting in the courtyard with his shopping cart, two violins and a cello. We moved into the apartment and I asked Nathaniel when he last had a lesson.

Early 1970s, he said. Right before a concert in Aspen.

"Did you play in Aspen?" Snyder asked.

"Yes, but I got in trouble with the psychiatrists there," Nathaniel said without explanation. "Straitjacket."

He mentioned the names of several teachers and mentors; Snyder knew them all.

"I brought you something," Snyder said, showing Nathaniel the sheet music to Pablo Casals' "Song of the Birds." "It's something appropriate, because you're kind of a wandering bird."

Nathaniel responded by telling Snyder there was a battle in the tunnels between Don Quixote and Colonel Sanders.

"That's a nice story," Snyder said kindly.

Without an invitation, Nathaniel began playing, and Snyder was instantly impressed.

"You know," he said when Nathaniel paused, "you're a very natural player."

For several minutes they talked music, a conversation that was way over my head. Snyder would later write to me: "The way in which he compared the philosophies of different composers and their visions is extraordinary."

Snyder took his own cello and began to play.

"Do you know this?" he asked.

"Bouree," Nathaniel said, from the Bach suite in C major for unaccompanied cello.

As Snyder continued, Nathaniel was riveted. He leaned forward and stared at the fingering. Then a smile suddenly took shape.

Next it was Nathaniel's turn to impress. Snyder asked if he could play Bach, and Nathaniel showed his chops.

"I'm amazed," Snyder said. "I know many talented people who don't have as pretty a sound."

As Nathaniel continued, Snyder leaned in to me.

"He might be a musical genius," he said. "It's not unusual to find someone with his aptitude. What is unbelievable is to see someone without recent training play so well."

Snyder told Nathaniel he ought to seriously consider keeping the apartment as a sanctuary — a safe place to connect spiritually with his music.

Thanks, Nathaniel responded quickly, but he preferred playing on the streets and in the tunnel.

"How about making this deal," Snyder said. "You come here as often as you can, so maybe we can have another lesson."

Nathaniel fidgeted like a teenager, then repeated his preference for the tunnel.

"Think of this as a clean, quiet tunnel," Snyder suggested.

Nathaniel was sitting by the window and his own shadow fell before him. The idea seemed to grow on him.

"I wouldn't have thought of it," he said. "Yeah. This is a brand new tunnel."

### Third Suite: The Conversation

Nathaniel stayed away from the apartment for days after the lesson, then surprised everyone by asking to leave his cart there for several hours while he copied sheet music at the public library. But that was it. He didn't go back, and he said he had no interest in the apartment for anything but lessons from Peter Snyder.

"Will you give me violin lessons?" I asked Nathaniel the day after Thanksgiving.

Sure, he said.

"Great," I said. "I'd like to do it at the apartment."

He's a smart man — cagey, even — and good at sniffing out a ruse. I think Nathaniel was on to me, but he agreed.

I didn't envy the poor man. I took guitar lessons for several years, but didn't even know how to hold a violin. We sat in the courtyard last Wednesday and Nathaniel was patient and gentle, making me think teaching

could one day give him new meaning and pay his bills. He had selected a simple piece of music for me to try but quickly gave up on it and asked me to just try and get something — anything — out of the violin.

What I got sounded like the torture of several small animals.

"There," Nathaniel said. "You get a sound and work with it. It's frustrating, but if you admire the violin, you'll weather the frustrations. Desire, discipline, diversity."

Nathaniel had a white shirt tied over his head. In one pocket of his blue cardigan was a tennis ball, in the other a dinner roll. He took out a copy of Beethoven's Ninth and began playing effortlessly.

By the time he switched to cello, he had drawn a crowd. One resident approached with a battery-operated drill and gunned it in rhythm with the music. Two other residents stopped and said they were musicians.

I suggested they start a band.

Nathaniel liked the idea, and he also liked it when another resident, wowed by his moves on cello, handed him a dollar.

"Dynamic," the resident said.

When everyone was gone but the two of us, I steered the conversation to Nathaniel's mother, who died several years ago.

You know, I said, she'd probably like to know you have a safe place to lay your head at night.

"I lost a god and I gained a god," he told me. His mother died in Cleveland, but he came to Los Angeles and found a statue of Beethoven in Pershing Square.

"It's rough out there," he said, "but as long as I can look at Beethoven, I'll be all right."

As I struggled with the violin, a man named James walked up, stood next to the "Smoking Prohibited" sign and lit a cigarette.

"Excuse me, sir," said Nathaniel, who hates smoke. "You can't smoke here."

"Who are you?" asked James. "You don't live here."

"I do too live here," Nathaniel snapped. "I have a place."

It was music to my ears. On some level, maybe Nathaniel had already begun thinking of the apartment as home, even if he hadn't spent a night in it.

"Where's your place?" James asked.

Nathaniel told him the room number.

## **"You're in violation of the city ordinance against smoking in that spot," Nathaniel persisted.**

"Well, so what? I don't have a house on wheels."

"You see?" Nathaniel said, standing next to his cart. "I knew it was personal."

"You need soap and water," James said.

"You're killing yourself and everyone else," Nathaniel retorted.

"Get a doctor," James said. "Get some help."

If Nathaniel was hurt by that, it didn't show. I wondered how many times in 30-plus years he's been insulted that way.

"You know what?" James asked. "It's a shame you allowed yourself to give up."

"I didn't give up," Nathaniel said.

"You're a young man, strong, you could get a job. You're a musician and you should encourage someone else. You can't encourage no one looking like that.... Look at all that talent gone to waste."

Nathaniel shrugged as he got his cart ready to leave.

"You gave up," James went on, reciting what sounded like a speech he'd heard a few times. "You push a cart and say, 'I quit. I quit on life' .... I can't stand to see you like that. I don't even know you, but I love you as a human being."

Nathaniel was ready to go. He told James he hadn't quit anything. Then he thanked him for trying to help, and pointed once more to the room he hasn't yet slept in.

"That is my place," he said.

Maybe one day it will be.

Reach the columnist at [steve.lopez@latimes.com](mailto:steve.lopez@latimes.com) and read previous columns at <http://www.latimes.com/lopez> .

# National Alliance on Mental Illness: FAQs about Schizophrenia

## What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a serious and challenging medical illness, an illness that affects well over 2 million American adults, which is about 1 percent of the population age 18 and older. Although it is often feared and misunderstood, schizophrenia is a treatable medical condition.

Schizophrenia often interferes with a person's ability to think clearly, to distinguish reality from fantasy, to manage emotions, make decisions, and relate to others. The first signs of schizophrenia typically emerge in the teenage years or early twenties, often later for females. Most people with schizophrenia contend with the illness chronically or episodically throughout their lives, and are often stigmatized by lack of public understanding about the disease. Schizophrenia is not caused by bad parenting or personal weakness. A person with schizophrenia does not have a "split personality," and almost all people with schizophrenia are not dangerous or violent towards others while they are receiving treatment. The World Health Organization has identified schizophrenia as one of the ten most debilitating diseases affecting human beings.

## What are the symptoms of schizophrenia?

No one symptom positively identifies schizophrenia. All of the symptoms of this illness can also be found in other mental illnesses. For example, psychotic symptoms may be caused by the use of illicit drugs, may be present in individuals with Alzheimer's disease, or may be characteristics of a manic episode in bipolar disorder. However, when a doctor observes the symptoms of schizophrenia and carefully assesses the history and the course of the illness over six months, he or she can almost always make a correct diagnosis.

As with any other psychiatric diagnosis, it is important to have a good medical work-up to be sure the diagnosis is correct. Drug use can mimic the symptoms of schizophrenia and may also trigger vulnerability in individuals at risk. Other medical concerns also need to be ruled out before a correct diagnosis can be made.

The symptoms of schizophrenia are generally divided into three categories -- Positive, Negative, and Cognitive:

- \* Positive Symptoms, or "psychotic" symptoms, include delusions and hallucinations because the patient has lost touch with reality in certain important ways. "Positive" refers to having overt symptoms that should not be there. Delusions cause individuals to believe that people are reading their thoughts or plotting against them, that others are secretly monitoring and threatening them, or that they can control other people's minds. Hallucinations cause people to hear or see things that are not present.

- \* Negative Symptoms include emotional flatness or lack of expression, an inability to start and follow through with activities, speech that is brief and devoid of content, and a lack of pleasure or interest in life. "Negative" does not refer to a person's attitude but to a lack of certain characteristics that should be there.

- \* Cognitive Symptoms pertain to thinking processes. For example, people may have difficulty with prioritizing tasks, certain kinds of memory functions, and organizing their thoughts. A common problem associated with schizophrenia is the lack of insight into the condition itself. This is not a willful denial but rather a part of the mental illness itself. Such a lack of understanding, of course, poses many challenges for loved ones seeking better care for the person with schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia also affects mood. While many individuals affected with schizophrenia become depressed, some also have apparent mood swings and even bipolar-like states. When mood instability is a major feature of the illness, it is called schizoaffective disorder, meaning that elements of schizophrenia and mood disorders are prominently displayed by the same individual. It is not clear whether schizoaffective disorder is a distinct condition or simply a subtype of schizophrenia.

### **What are the causes of schizophrenia?**

Scientists still do not know the specific causes of schizophrenia, but research has shown that the brains of people with schizophrenia are different from the brains of people without the illness. Like many other medical illnesses such as cancer or diabetes, schizophrenia seems to be caused by a combination of problems including genetic vulnerability and environmental factors that occur during a person's development. Recent research has identified certain genes that appear to increase risk for schizophrenia. Like cancer and diabetes, the genes only increase the chances of becoming ill; they alone do not cause the illness.

### **How is schizophrenia treated?**

While there is no cure for schizophrenia, it is a treatable and manageable illness. However, people sometimes stop treatment because of medication side effects, the lack of insight noted above, disorganized thinking, or because they feel the medication is no longer working. People with schizophrenia who stop taking prescribed medication are at risk of relapse into an acute psychotic episode. It's important to realize that the needs of the person with schizophrenia may change over time. Here are a few examples of supports and interventions:

\* Recovery Supports/Relapse Prevention: There is increasing recognition of the benefits of learning from "someone who has been there." NAMI's Peer to Peer program is designed to help individuals with mental illness learn from those who have become skilled at managing their illness. Peer support groups are also recognized as invaluable as individuals living with mental illness report better recovery outcomes as the shared experience is recognized as extremely beneficial. NAMI C.A.R.E. support groups are available in many communities and are expanding to better meet this need.

\* Family Support: Caregivers benefit greatly from NAMI's Family-to-Family education program, taught by family members who have the knowledge and the skills needed to cope effectively with a loved one with a mental disorder. This program is available in all 50 states through many NAMI affiliates, and is offered in multiple languages in many communities.

\* Hospitalization: Individuals who experience acute symptoms of schizophrenia may require intensive treatment, including hospitalization. Hospitalization is necessary to treat severe delusions or hallucinations, serious suicidal thoughts, an inability to care for oneself, or severe problems with drugs or alcohol. Hospitalization may be essential to protect people from hurting themselves or others.

- Medication: The primary medications for schizophrenia are called antipsychotics. Antipsychotics help relieve the positive symptoms of schizophrenia by helping to correct an imbalance in the chemicals that enable brain cells to communicate with each other. As with drug treatments for other physical illnesses, many patients with severe mental illnesses may need to try several different antipsychotic medications before they find the one, or the combination of medications, that works best for them.

o Conventional Antipsychotics were introduced in the 1950s and all had similar ability to relieve the positive symptoms of schizophrenia. However, most of these older "conventional" antipsychotics differed in the side effects they produced. These conventional antipsychotics include chlorpromazine (Thorazine), fluphenazine (Prolixin), haloperidol (Haldol), thiothixene (Navane), trifluoperazine (Stelazine), perphenazine (Trilafon), and thioridazine (Mellaril). Some of the risks that may be incurred from taking these medicines include dry mouth, blurred vision, drowsiness, constipation, and movement disorders such as stiffness, a sense of restless motion, and tardive dyskinesia.

o "Atypical" Antipsychotics were introduced in the 1990s. When compared to the older "conventional" antipsychotics, these medications appear to be equally effective for helping reduce the positive symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions, but may be better than the older medications at relieving the negative symptoms of the illness, e.g., withdrawal, thinking problems, and lack of energy. The atypical antipsychotics include risperidone (Risperdal), clozapine (Clozaril), olanzapine (Zyprexa), quetiapine (Seroquel), and ziprasidone (Geodon). Clozapine (Clozaril) is an atypical antipsychotic medicine with special benefits and risks that are too numerous to cover in this brief fact sheet. All these antipsychotics have serious side effects such as weight gain and the risk of diabetes, but they all do not carry the same relative risk for these conditions.

All medications have side effects. Different medications produce different side effects, and people differ in the amount and severity of side effects they experience. Side effects can often be treated by changing the dose of the medication, switching to a different medication, or treating the side effect directly with an additional medication. NAMI's fact sheets on medications, developed by independent pharmacists, are a starting point to understand the risks and benefits of any individual medication. Individuals thinking of starting or changing their medication should always gather good information, consider the risks and benefits, consult with their doctor and loved ones and work together to develop the most safe and effective treatment plan possible.

\* Psychosocial Rehabilitation: Research shows that people with schizophrenia who attend structured psychosocial rehabilitation programs and continue with their medical treatment manage their illness best. One example of an effective psychosocial approach for the most severely ill, or those with both mental illness and substance abuse, is the Program for Assertive Community Treatment (PACT), an intensive team effort in local communities to help people stay out of the hospital and live independently. Available 24-hours a day, seven-days a week, PACT professionals meet their clients where they live, providing at-home support at whatever level is needed. Professionals work with clients to address problems effectively, to make sure medications are being properly taken, and to meet the routine daily challenges of life, such as grocery shopping and managing money.

\* Substance use counseling, housing, work and educational skill development are among other supports frequently required to maximize a person's prospects for a higher functional level. Additional information on these topics is available at [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org).

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, M.D., February 2007

[http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By\\_Illness&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=54&ContentID=23036&Istid=327](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=54&ContentID=23036&Istid=327)