



Kylie

Kylie Fung works as an office coordinator and would like to be pregnant by the age of 30. **Jane Watchorn** writes moving prose in her family home

and likes going to the movies with friends.

Simon Champ is a self-described “artist, mental health educator and part-time psychotic”. He is also an independent member of the National

Community Advisory Group on Mental Health.

Any one of them could be your neighbour. They are all schizophrenic.



Simon

These people are schizophrenic...

by MONICA DAVIDSON

Let's get some facts straight. Having schizophrenia does not mean having multiple personalities, nor does it mean being violent or intellectually disabled. "Schizophrenia" is a loose term used to describe a number of psychotic illnesses that have overlapping symptoms. A psychotic episode could involve delusions, disordered thoughts, hallucinations, apathy and loss of motivation. Men and women from all ethnic groups, classes, religions, cultures and backgrounds live with the illness, and between 170,000 and 510,000 Australians will develop schizophrenia in their lifetime.

Rob Ramjan, executive officer of the NSW Schizophrenia Fellowship, says, "A person with schizophrenia is like any other person. They have the same desires, wants, hopes and directions. Everybody is different, and the label means nothing."

Jane Wisthorp is 35 and a writer. She began seeing a psychiatrist when she was 16, but her first major episode occurred a year later. "I had a crisis at a school dance. I was dehydrating and I got really spooked by the people there. I had been excluded from groups of people for some time, and I was trying to find ways of including myself.

"There were people sitting at a table, and I was afraid of their cigarettes because they were glowing. There was a sense of unreality about it. [Afterwards], I shut my eyes and saw these boots tramping down in my mind. I was really scared."

Simon Champ, 38, had his first episode at 17. "I was hearing things on the radio that weren't there. Colours and sounds became much brighter, and I started to believe things that weren't happening."

Kyle Fung, 26, also experienced her first

psychotic episode at 17. "I started feeling like I was having a nervous breakdown. I ended up going into a full-on paranoia, and I had a delusion that the town I was living in was fabricated to get me.

"I also had audible and visible hallucinations. I thought I could hear a phone ringing in the back block from our house — it was a vacant block. I also thought I could hear a phone coming from the back shed, but there was no phone there. Everything seemed really intense — too bright and too vivid and a bit trippy, I guess."

Although schizophrenia cannot be defined by a set group of symptoms, some symptoms do seem to be common among various sufferers. "Probably the most common, and the one we look for first, is thought disorder," says Rob Ramjan. "This symptom can be spotted from the outside by a person's speech. Thought disorder can lead to speech that is difficult to follow, or a person's thoughts may seem to have no connection, or strange connection. Hallucinations are another symptom, and all five senses can

experience them. Although imagined, hallucinations are terribly real to the person with schizophrenia, and their body will react accordingly.

"A woman I used to know had a very specific hallucination of smell," says Ramjan. "She'd get the smell in the bathroom and around her husband, and it was the smell of rotten, maggot-blown flesh. When that happened to her the physical response was to vomit, as it would be if you found a week-old dead cat. Her body responded as though that were really happening, and it's the same for people having other kinds of hallucinations."

Another defining symptom is delusional thinking. Delusions fit into two main groups, those of grandeur or of paranoia. People with schizophrenia may believe they have special powers or that they are a famous figure; or alternatively that people are out to get them. Says Kyle of her first episode, "It got to the point where I thought my mother and stepfather were trying to hurt me, so I stopped eating and drinking. I was so paranoid and freaked-out."

"They told me I was possessed"

Religions across all cultures can play a part in the fear, misdiagnosis and intolerance people experience when dealing with schizophrenia. "A lot of the stigma comes from religious beliefs," asserts Simon Champ, "and not only Christian beliefs, but most religions tend to say that mental illness is punishment from God for sin, or that it's possession.

"I still meet church people who tell me I'm possessed, and that really alarms me because one of the first points of contact for a lot of people with schizophrenia is actually a church rather than a psychiatrist. If people are hearing voices or seeing visions, chances are they'll interpret it as God or the devil trying to talk to them, and go to the church for help."

Dignosing schizophrenia can be very difficult as symptoms can also be the result of a number of different problems, including other kinds of mental illness, trauma, or an alcohol or drug-related disease.

Like the majority of people with the illness, both Jane and Simon had their first psychotic episode in their late teens but were not diagnosed until their twenties. "I think the labelling, or diagnosis, changes your perception," says Jane. "When I was told 'schizophrenia' at 22, I didn't know what it was. I wonder how much better off I am knowing the diagnosis, because my perception of myself did change."

Kylie, on the other hand, has never been given a firm diagnosis of schizophrenia. "I think I can relate to most symptoms of mental illness at different stages of my life. On my first admission, I asked the doctor: 'What is wrong with me?' And he said, 'You have schizophrenia.' So for a while I thought that was it, and then a while later someone called it manic depression, and after that it went back to schizophrenia. It keeps changing.

"For a lot of people, diagnosis is a godsend. It's clarified it and given them a reason for why they've been unwell. A lot of people I know feel better having a diagnosis, and it helps them cope with their illness or symptoms, but it doesn't really make a big difference for me," she says.

While an absolute definition of schizophrenia remains elusive, the causes of the illness are also subject to speculation. Many believe there is a genetic loading towards schizophrenia, which means that it may run in families. "There is certainly evidence to suggest it," says Rob Ramjan, but I wouldn't say it any heavier than that."

The general population has approximately a one per cent chance of developing schizophrenia, but some studies have shown that a person with one parent or a non-identical twin with schizophrenia has a 12-16 per cent chance of developing the illness. The chances increase again if both parents or an identical twin has schizophrenia, possibly by as much as 50-60 per cent. It is imperative to remember, however, that nobody is born with schizophrenia, only a predisposition towards it.

Stress, environment, trauma, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, allergies, drug abuse

and other illnesses have all been linked to schizophrenia. "There are a lot of psychiatrists who say that illegal drugs don't cause schizophrenia, that the person already had the predisposition and that the drugs just sped it up a bit. I think that's bullshit," says Ramjan. "Illegal drugs can contribute to a person developing schizophrenia."

Kylie has her own theories as to the cause of her illness. She mentions that there was a history of mental illness in her family, although it was left untreated. "I'm sure it was due to my lifestyle at the time. I'd had speed and I was smoking dope from the age of 15. I was drinking a lot on the weekends, not eating well, not getting enough rest and working full-time. I think all those things contributed to what happened. And maybe it's also biochemical."

"I attempted suicide three times"

Between nine and 15 per cent of people diagnosed with schizophrenia will commit suicide. This figure is three to five times the national average, and means that approximately 75,500 Australians currently alive will commit suicide as a result of schizophrenia.

"Probably more people die from schizophrenia than from AIDS," says Simon Champ. "If it was any other illness that was, in effect, killing so many people, there'd be a scandal."

Kylie Fung tried to commit suicide several times. "In 1990 I attempted suicide two or three times. I tried to overdose on my medication. It was a real turning point for me, but I would never recommend that anyone attempt suicide. There are better ways of coping."

Simon points out that causes are not the only area of concern. "People think that the cause was the death of a relative, or because they smoked marijuana. Those things are only triggers. The cause, as far as we know, is something to do with brain chemistry, or something to do with physiology. There's probably dozens of different types of schizophrenia."

Issues surrounding causes, symptoms and triggers are only a part of living with schizophrenia. Negative stigma is a major problem for many with a mental illness, and schizophrenia is probably the most feared and misunderstood by the community. "The most common misconceptions are that it's a split personality and that those with

schizophrenia are violent," says Simon. He adds that people habitually confuse mental illness with intellectual disability. "That's very frustrating, especially when people talk to you in slow motion."

Jane has been denied accommodation and other necessities because of her illness, despite being able to control her symptoms with medication and support. "When people know about the illness, they treat you differently. Schizophrenia is seen as highly unpredictable, and something which people are just afraid of."

On the other hand, Kylie cannot remember ever being prejudiced against because of her illness. "I can't think of any time when anyone's been discriminating about it. Most of the people I hang around with are intelligent, open and understanding, so fortunately I don't mix with people who have unhealthy attitudes about it."

For Simon, the misconception that people with schizophrenia are violent is "most frustrating — people are very afraid of people with schizophrenia, and that's why people don't see us having relationships. I think that goes very deep. We're supposed to have emotions that are somehow crippled or different from other people. That's frustrating."

On a per capita basis, there is evidence to suggest that people with schizophrenia commit fewer violent crimes than members of the general population. "I think society needs to believe that violence comes from the mentally ill because it can't accept the violence in itself," says Simon.

Another myth about mental illness is the assumption that sufferers are unable to form relationships. "Relationships can be stressful for anyone, particularly if you have schizophrenia, but they can also be a wonderful support," says Simon. However, because of fear and lack of support, some people with schizophrenia do find establishing relationships difficult. "When you're psychotic it can put a lot of pressure on a relationship," Simon continues. "I think a lot of people with schizophrenia edit relationships out of their lives because of stigma. A lot of people see it as a disability."

Jane is not in a relationship, and has had some trouble finding someone to care about. "I've often been scared of relationships because I've heard of cases where girls are being told what to do by men.

That's not for me. I think the average guy would not understand me. In some ways he might be able to relate, but people with schizophrenia tend to have a rapport.

"I think one of the best things that can happen for people with schizophrenia is friendship and relationships. It means that the isolation, which is so prevalent with schizophrenia, can be broken down. Everyone needs acceptance, and people with schizophrenia are no different."

Kylie has been in a relationship with her partner Andrew for four years. They met at Richmond Fellowship Therapeutic Community House, supported housing for people living with mental illness in the community. "We just got on fantastically and I was instantly taken by him. I just thought he was great, I still do." They are now happily living in a de facto situation.

The treatment of schizophrenia is possible and often highly successful. While there is no "cure", people can recover. With medication, support and rehabilitation most people can live with schizophrenia in the community. Psychotic episodes can recur, but self-monitoring is very important. "If you can pick up the

symptoms early enough, you can slow down your life or take more medication to avoid a full-on episode," says Simon.

"People with schizophrenia are people first," says Jane. "These people have friendships, they have relationships sometimes, and they go on with their lives."

Simon believes living with the illness can be positive; "Schizophrenia can be a journey of growth. Living with it can

actually deepen your experience of life."

Kylie feels the same way, despite the hardships. "It sounds bizarre, but in a way it's been a gift. It's made me a lot more open and aware, and understanding of so many things. It's also given me an insight into myself, which I really need, and it's shown me how to cherish the good moments in life. You should never, ever give up your dreams." ■

"You need to have a living will"

People living with schizophrenia have rights in the community. A recent amendment to the anti-discrimination laws means that, legally, people with a mental illness cannot be discriminated against because of their disorder. Partners and friends of people with schizophrenia can also help deal with the rights and lifestyle of their colleagues when they are experiencing a psychotic episode.

Simon Champ explains: "By talking about the illness when you're well, you can plan for a time when you might relapse. In a sense you need to have a strategy in place. Some people have a living will, which is where people, particularly those with a manic depressive illness, will enter into an agreement with their partner or a trusted friend about what they want to happen to them when they're sick. Once you've lost insight, it's very difficult to manage your affairs."