

Richard, 40

Mental health advocate & policy advisor living with schizophrenia, SYDNEY

Diagnosed with schizophrenia at 22 years of age, Richard, 40, Sydney is a mental health advocate, and policy advisor to the NSW Mental Health Commission. He has four degrees, including a PhD in the sociology of schizophrenia, and enjoys playing music, reading political biographies and meditating.



In 2002, Richard began to experience bizarre thoughts, hear persecutory voices, and see words jump out from the television. After wrestling with these distressing symptoms for a month, Richard sought help from his GP, who subsequently diagnosed him with schizophrenia.

Left with a shattered sense of self, and perspective on the world, Richard felt like he had “fallen off a cliff, walked into a dark cave, and been stripped down to psychological nakedness.”

Richard has since made remarkable progress, and has learned to live with this complex mental illness.

Today, he is wishing to share his journey with schizophrenia, to heighten community understanding, and acceptance of, and compassion for, those living with the illness.

This is Richard's story.

In 2002, nearing the end of his law degree, Richard began to experience some irrational things.

“I developed some very bizarre thoughts. On one occasion, I thought my university friend was the devil.

“I also imagined a persecutory voice in my head telling me I was mad, and that I should kill myself,” said Richard.

“Images and words would ‘jump out’ at me from the TV, and during films.

“My mind felt like an island of sense in a sea of irrationality,” Richard said.

Although Richard was able to ‘hide’ his illness from others most of the time, when a counsellor identified his “aural hallucinations”, this reinforced Richard's fear of living with an unstable mind.

“I visited my GP with my mother. The GP gave me some medication and asked me to return the following day. I was then admitted to a private mental health clinic in Sydney,” said Richard.

Although he spent the ensuing three months at this clinic, Richard's recollection of it is relatively vague.

"The time I spent at the clinic, during the early part of my illness, is somewhat hazy.

"The clinic was mostly a calm and comfortable place, and by being 'cut off from the world', I also felt protected," Richard said.

"At the same time, I was spending time with people who were facing serious issues, and that was sometimes, fear-inducing too."

Although Richard's schizophrenia is well managed nowadays, it took him many years to accept that he not only has a mental illness, but the most disabling of all mental illnesses.

The impact of living with schizophrenia makes it challenging for Richard to work full-time.

"I can't work full-time, which means I don't have enough money to buy or rent a flat. So I still live at home with mum and dad," said Richard.

The anxiety and stigma that comes with living with schizophrenia, also proves challenging for Richard.

"Although my physical health is fine, I am currently, more challenged by anxiety.

"I'm also affected by the stigma of schizophrenia, which runs deep. People associate schizophrenia with violence, irrationality and intense psychosis," Richard said.

"It's very hard to find a partner who both understands, and accepts, the illness."

Richard is wishing to share his personal story, to help reduce the heavy stigma associated with schizophrenia.

"A mental illness, such as schizophrenia, can be an inevitable part of life. We should accept the illness, just as we do with a physical illness.

"A mental illness does not make you 'crazy', 'dangerous', or less of a person. Everyone needs love and hope, and this applies to those living with a mental illness too," said Richard.

According to Richard, timely and affordable access to a range of treatment options plays an important role in the effective management of schizophrenia, while importantly, arming the patient community with hope.

"Love gives you a sense of self-worth – of being appreciated, having a net, and not being lonely.

"Hope gets you up in the morning, and helps to continue one's relationship with mental illness," Richard said.

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