

# Learning to Live with Schizophrenia

**If you saw Reggie walking down one of his North Hill neighborhood streets, he would strike you as a sharp-dressed man with a smile that could light up all of Akron. You'd never guess that he once carried what he refers to as, "the weight of the world" on his shoulders.**

**"I first started hearing voices when I was about 20 years old. I would hear the radio and the television speak to me personally. I was so scared, but I knew that it wasn't real; however, I also knew that I was sick and I needed help," says Reggie as he shakes his head trying to erase what he recalls as the worst time in his life.**

Reggie, supported by his family, admitted himself into a Cleveland Mental Hospital 25 years ago and was diagnosed as being schizophrenic. Reggie recalls this moment as devastating and one he has spent his life trying to forget.

Schizophrenia is a disabling brain disease that affects 2 million Americans each year, and is characterized by hallucinations, illusions, and the belief that other people can read your mind. In addition, people with schizophrenia often try to "self-medicate" with drugs or alcohol, and end up becoming addicted.

"When I was first diagnosed with Schizophrenia I ignored it. I didn't want to believe that I had a mental illness. I wouldn't take my schizophrenia medicine, instead I would self-medicate myself with alcohol and drugs. I would drink and drug myself on anything, and I wouldn't stop until I passed out. Even then, I would just wake up and do it all over again," recalls Reggie.

Reggie found the power to stop drinking and doing

drugs for fifteen years.

"When I wasn't drinking or doing drugs for a long time, I thought that I had my life together. I had three children and a beautiful wife, but I never told my wife I was diagnosed as schizophrenic because I didn't want to believe that I was different from everyone else. I would socially withdraw myself from them because I would hear voices telling me things about my wife, and I thought that everyone could read the thoughts that ran through



my mind. Trying to control my inner thoughts for fifteen years was a terrible way to live. Everyday felt like being in prison," remembers Reggie.

After he and his wife divorced, Reggie decided that he could no longer hide from his illness, and turned to the Interval Brotherhood Home (I.B.H.) for substance abuse treatment and psychiatric care. It was

there that Reggie began freeing himself from the stresses of his illness and all of his unexpressed emotions, many of which date back to his childhood years.

“Growing up in a African American neighborhood on the Cleveland East side was rough. At a young age, I saw a lot of things, such as drugs, prostitution, and abuse. I learned to carry my emotions inside, never fully expressing them. I now know that talking to a person you trust can help you understand past situations in a different way,” says Reggie with an emphatically positive tone.

After the I.B.H. program ended, Reggie felt the old demons returning, and again turned to alcohol and drugs to relieve him of his pain. His non-stop alcoholism and drug abuse, along with symptoms of schizophrenia continued to plague him and eventually landed him at St. Thomas Hospital.

“St. Thomas Hospital referred me to Portage Path Behavioral Health for psychiatric treatment, along with a treatment program for substance abuse. It was at Portage Path that I learned how to be honest with myself and my counselor about my schizophrenia, along with all of the baggage that I have been carrying around with me all of my life. I even learned that having this illness wasn't my fault, and that I probably inherited it. Talking to a counselor about my problems felt like the weight of the world was lifted off of my shoulders,” says Reggie with a sigh of relief.

According to Scott Schmitt, psychiatrist at Portage Path Behavioral Health, the treatment of Schizophrenia usually involves both medication and therapy. “It's very important to remember that you are treating a human being and not just an illness,” says Schmitt.

At present, Reggie considers this to be “one of the happiest times in his life.” He has banished the voices that used to torment him, and he has learned to accept his illness, knowing that he will likely need treatment for the rest of his life. In addition, Reggie celebrated his third year of sobriety in mid-January.

**If you would like to learn more about Schizophrenia please visit the Schizophrenia Homepage at [www.schizophrenia.com](http://www.schizophrenia.com) or call Portage Path Behavioral Health at 330-253-3100.**