

When reality isn't: the fright

A teenager withdraws from his family and friends, preferring to sit alone in his room listening to the voices inside his head. His parents try to talk to him about his behaviour, but he insists he has seen visions of the devil, who is ordering him to avoid contact with others.

Feature by
Rosa Jackson

Is this normal adolescence, tainted by the use of drugs? Or is this something more; not a phase, but a mind-altering disease which will remain with this teenager for the rest of his life? It is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between "growing pains" and schizophrenia, but there are certain signs of this frightening illness which should not be dismissed.

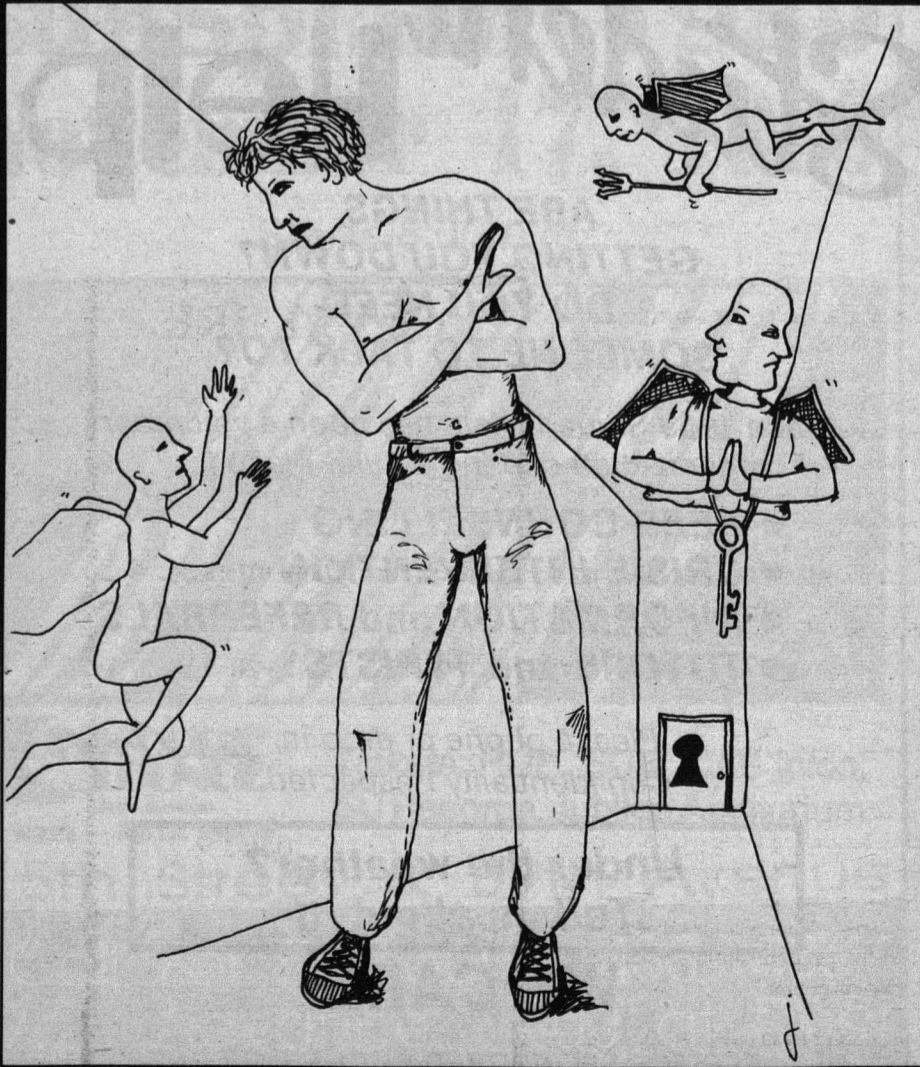
Graphics by
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Schizophrenia strikes about one in a hundred people, usually appearing during adolescence or early adulthood. Common symptoms include hallucinations, delusions, preoccupations and withdrawal. Schizophrenics perceive the world differently than other people; they have trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Realizing something is wrong with them, they feel confused and afraid; this often leads to suicide attempts.

Layout by Karin
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There are a number of myths surrounding schizophrenia. Many believe schizophrenics possess multiple personalities, as portrayed in the movie *The Three Faces of Eve*. In fact, multiple personality disorders are rare and are not related to schizophrenia.

Another commonly held belief is that schizophrenics are dangerous. Schizophrenics under treatment are no more likely to commit violent crimes than the average person. They are inclined to withdraw from society rather than become aggressive, and hurt themselves rather than others. It is also not true that schizophrenics are less intelligent than the rest of the population. The disease does not discriminate according to IQ. Many schizophrenics have very high levels of intelligence.



Jim Hunter, Vice President of the Edmonton Chapter of Friends of Schizophrenics, describes the devastating experience of learning his son was schizophrenic. "My son is 29 years old now. On Christmas day, two months after his 17th birthday, he began to tell us he was being followed, that he had the names of various drug dealers, and that the police had the house bugged.

"As a retired policeman, I didn't believe him. I thought he was feeling guilty because he had been using various drugs. During the next two to three years he became increasingly delusional. I took him to a psychologist, but I wasn't able to have him assessed... One night he attacked his brother and I had him committed for a 30 day period.

"He had an IQ in the 150 range and he managed to mask most of the symptoms. They let him go at the end of the observation period."