

SCHIZOPHRENIA AND MISSING PERSONS

Frequently, people with schizophrenia decide that a new location will provide an answer to the problems that the illness has imposed on them—or they may be directed by voices to leave. They simply disappear. If the person is a minor, you should contact the Missing Persons Bureau of the local police department. If he/she is legally of age, the police may have no authority to return the person or to inform you of his/her actions or whereabouts.

It may happen that the person leaves the hospital before treatment has been completed. If the person is an involuntary patient, the hospital is responsible for notifying the police to look for and return the patient to the hospital. In some jurisdictions, if the police have been unable to find a missing involuntary patient within a certain period, the hospital then has the right to discharge the person.

When a person with schizophrenia has disappeared from the hospital, the option of changing the patient's voluntary status to involuntary is open to the attending physician(s). The police can then be asked to look for the patient.

Often, relatives and caregivers may simply have to wait until the person surfaces. This may happen when the person has been picked up as a vagrant, has gone to a hostel, or has been taken to a hospital for help. Then (unless the police have been involved) you may make arrangements for the person to return home or consider other options.

Here are some tips on preparing yourself for a possible disappearance of the person:

- If the person mentions places he/she is interested in, or would like to visit sometime, jot it down. It could be a useful clue as to where to look should he/she disappear.
- If he/she decides to travel, try to think of some effective way of staying in touch. For example, one father arranged with his son that he would keep his son's money for him while the son was away. Then, whenever the son needed some funds, the father would send him some, but not too much. This was an effective way of maintaining contact.

Some ideas to consider if the person disappears:

- If you have lost touch with him/her for a period of time, it is wise not to wait too long before you begin checking. Although the police may have no basis for active involvement, it is worth speaking to Missing Persons and telling them your story. They may be able to help by doing some checking, or offering some practical advice.
- In 1998, the Schizophrenia Society of Canada (SSC) created a working group to develop a Missing Persons Registry. Our hope is that, with the help of volunteers across Canada and the cooperation of other organizations (e.g., hospitals, governments, coroners' offices), a database may be implemented to track individuals as they move within and across provincial boundaries. This project was undertaken in the hope of helping people with schizophrenia maintain their medication and treatment program while away from home, and to attempt to alleviate some of the fears and worries of family members and caregivers by locating these people. If you have some idea where the individual may have gone, get in touch with your provincial schizophrenia society or the national office. They may be able to help you through a provincial association or chapter in the area where you think the person may be.
- If travel to the United States is a possibility, contact the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) directly or through SSC.
- Check with local voluntary agencies such as the Salvation Army. Sometimes a missing person will show up in one of their hostels. Also, your place of worship may be able to help, particularly if the individual took a keen interest in religion.

If you decide to use the services of a firm of private investigators, determine if the firm you select is well connected with the police (they may be able to get help from this source that you cannot). Discuss with the firm a reasonable limit on its expenses, including the fee, to undertake a realistic search on your behalf.

Adapted from [Schizophrenia: Rays of Hope \(4th Edition\)](#) developed by the [Schizophrenia Society of Canada](#), 2012.