

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### New Research Argues Schizophrenia Should Be Recognized as a Neurodevelopmental Syndrome

Washington, DC — For decades, schizophrenia has been framed primarily as a chronic psychiatric illness defined by disability and crisis-driven care. But new research funded by the Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance (S&PAA), published in *Schizophrenia Research*, the official journal of the Schizophrenia International Research Society (SIRS), suggests this understanding may be incomplete. In their paper, “*Reframing schizophrenia as a neurodevelopmental syndrome: The scientific and social imperative*,” the authors propose that schizophrenia should also be recognized as a neurodevelopmental syndrome rooted in early brain development—an insight that could influence diagnosis, treatment approaches, and public understanding of the condition.

The research, authored by Arundati Nagendra, Raquelle Mesholam-Gately, Jason Shafrin, and Matcheri S. Keshavan, brings together investigators and policy experts affiliated with S&PAA, Harvard Medical School, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and the Center for Healthcare Economics and Policy at FTI Consulting. Drawing on biological, clinical, and epidemiological evidence, the authors review decades of research supporting a developmental model of schizophrenia.

Rather than viewing schizophrenia solely through the lens of adult psychiatric disability, the authors argue that the condition often reflects disruptions in brain development that begin long before the onset of psychosis. These early differences may appear in childhood or adolescence as subtle changes in cognition, behavior, or social functioning before later clinical symptoms emerge.

To translate this scientific understanding into real-world change, the authors outline a three-part strategy described as the “Three Rs”:

- **Reclassify** schizophrenia within major diagnostic systems such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) as a neurodevelopmental syndrome
- **Rename** schizophrenia to reflect current scientific understanding and reduce stigma associated with the term
- **Reshape** societal narratives so the condition is understood as a developmental brain disorder that remains responsive to intervention across the lifespan

According to the authors, reframing schizophrenia could have important implications for care; including earlier identification of risk, more developmentally informed treatment approaches, expanded insurance coverage for early intervention, and reduced stigma surrounding the condition.

“Recognizing schizophrenia as both a serious mental illness and a neurodevelopmental syndrome better reflects modern science and may help catalyze earlier identification and more developmentally informed care,” said Matcheri S. Keshavan, MD, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a coauthor of the research.

The paper also highlights growing scientific evidence that schizophrenia shares developmental and genetic features with other neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, although symptoms typically emerge later in adolescence or early adulthood.

“Reframing schizophrenia through a neurodevelopmental lens helps connect decades of scientific findings with the lived realities of patients and families,” said Raquelle Mesholam-Gately, PhD, a coauthor of the research and Assistant Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School, Cambridge Health Alliance, and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. “It also opens the door to new ways of thinking about early identification, stigma reduction, and long-term recovery.”

The authors emphasize that the current framing of schizophrenia can contribute to delayed diagnosis, crisis-oriented care, and poorer treatment outcomes. A neurodevelopmental framework may help shift the focus toward earlier support, prevention, and long-term recovery. They also note that schizophrenia is often diagnosed only after significant functional decline or a first psychiatric crisis. A developmental framework could shift attention to earlier warning signs—such as subtle cognitive, social, or behavioral changes that may appear years before the onset of psychosis—potentially enabling earlier identification and more continuous care across adolescence and adulthood.

The research suggests that neurodevelopmental framing could also influence research priorities and policy decisions. Positioning schizophrenia within the broader landscape of brain development and early intervention may help align the condition with national research initiatives focused on prevention, brain health, and long-term functional recovery.

Reframing alone will not resolve longstanding gaps in schizophrenia care; however, it could serve as a catalyst for broader reforms including workforce expansion, integrated care models, and greater investment in research and early intervention.

The research appears in *Schizophrenia Research*, a leading international journal focused on advancing scientific understanding of schizophrenia and related psychotic disorders.

### **About the Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance**

The Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance (S&PAA) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of people affected by schizophrenia and related psychotic disorders through research, education, and advocacy.

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