

New study shows people react differently when speaking to someone with a mental illness

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New research by graduate student Michael Best (Psychology) and Christopher Bowie (Psychology) has shown that the brain processes communication from a person with schizophrenia differently when the listener is aware of speaker's illness.

In an effort to better understand the [stigma](#) and social exclusion often associated with [mental illness](#), Mr. Best and Professor Bowie examined the [brain activity](#) of people listening to sentences that included abnormalities commonly associated with schizophrenia.

"Typically, when we listen to someone who uses a word that does not seem consistent with the context, such as a word that is out of place or a completely made up word, we have a very quick increase in brain activity as we try to make sense of what the person means to say," says Mr. Best. "If someone was told that the speaker had schizophrenia, they did not show the same tendency for increased brain activity when a sentence was confusing. It might mean that they expected their behaviour to be unusual."

Individuals with schizophrenia often experience difficulty interacting with other people, in part because of communication abnormalities that are common in the disorder. The study by Mr. Best and Dr. Bowie was the first study to show there is a difference in how the brain reacts to listening to speech by people diagnosed with schizophrenia.

"We face some big issues in trying to reduce social exclusion faced by those with schizophrenia," says Dr. Bowie. "Although anti-stigma campaigns work well for those with other mental illnesses, we see that after these efforts people report more [empathy](#) for those with [schizophrenia](#) but a tendency to want even more distance. These results are our first in a series of steps that we hope will help us better understand the mechanisms that underlie stigma and [social exclusion](#)."

The study was recently published in *Schizophrenia Research*.

More information: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23800615

Provided by Queen's University

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