It was 7 a.m. already and the alarm clock was ringing so loud it could wake up the entire neighbourhood. “Today is going to be a very busy day” were the first thoughts running in my head. As I rushed through the daily mundane business of getting ready for the Lab, I realized I was forgetting something. Yes! My I-pod. It helped me go through the day. Nothing can beat good music in lifting up your mood, especially when you have been slogging hard and the results of your experiments do not match your expectations. Yes, good music is an absolute must! So I plugged in the headphones and started humming “Found Love in Hopeless Place” by Rihanna.

As I crossed the corridors overlooking my Lab searching for my Labcoat, I realized someone had been using my workspace already. My pipettes were not on the stand and the eppendorf jar was missing! Could it be the nasty new girl who had recently joined the lab? Was she using my stuff without even asking permission for it?

We didn’t exactly hit it off on the first day. As I stood there wondering who this might be, I realized someone was watching me from behind. I turned suddenly to a pair of dark brown bespectacled eyes, hidden beneath a bunch of brown bushy hair, on a person with the cutest smile. “Hi! I am Dave,” said this stranger with one of my pipettes in his hand. I greeted him back and came to know that he was a part-time research trainee from a collaborative group. He was to work in our group for a year or two. We instantly hit it off.

Schizophrenia
The ‘Stalker’ in the Head

Schizophrenics suffer from a cluster of symptoms that range from self destructive to sometimes violent behaviour. It is for people in the vicinity to detect the cause, as early detection and medication can help improve the life of the patient.
Alisha was the other new girl who also joined the Lab next month. She was to carry out a part of her project with us. Such a pretty, lovely and bubbly person, someone who could make you smile even at the worst times! I was so happy to meet them both. We three were really a team now. However, none of us knew at that time, this was all going to change... very soon.

It was one Thursday late at midnight that my cellphone rang. It was Alisha sounding very hysterical, "There is someone outside my window." Alisha lived in a single-room ground floor flat she had rented from an old lady who was now living in Bangalore. I lived miles away from her, on the other end of the town and could really not do much, except tell her to calm down and check if every door was locked. She confirmed that it was.

The next few days, Alisha continued to be scared but we tried to laugh off the incidence, blaming it on a combination of horror movies and lots of junk food. But as time passed, Alisha was becoming more obscure and aloof. She stopped coming to the Lab and preferred to stay in her room. I thought it was stress and so I called her to stay with me for some time. I still remember how Alisha was unable to sleep when she spent a night at my place. How she would wake up every few hours feeling unsafe. She decided to go back to her own apartment inspite of my pleas to stay with me longer. Alisha had started acting strange and distracted. She had also started distancing herself away from us.

Meanwhile, we got busy preparing for an important Conference. It was a day before the Conference in the evening that my doorbell rang. To my surprise it was Dave. He looked distraught, almost pale. He parked himself unsteadily on the chair and then uttered the words that I, even to this day, find extremely hard to believe "Alisha is dead".

My heart was racing and my mind was spinning. "The Stalker" was the first thought that ran in my head. "She committed suicide!" I was told. It was only later I came to realise that I was right indeed. Alisha had succumbed to a stalker. A dangerous stalker inside her head! Our friend was helplessly caught in a maze of inexplicable bizarre events and thoughts, all owing to a mental disorder that is as fascinating as it is frightening – Schizophrenia.

Dangerous Malady
Schizophrenia, which was described almost 100 years ago, even in this age and century, holds the distinction of being among the most complex chronic mental disorders with very little knowledge about its causes and cures. Affecting 7 per 1000 of the adult population, mostly in the age group 15-35 years, Schizophrenia has the capacity to devastate the lives of all it touches. It is a mental illness where reality is interpreted abnormally causing psychosis.

The most dangerous aspect of schizophrenia is depression that strikes the hardest often leading to attempted suicides.
People with schizophrenia are known to suffer from both olfactory and tactile hallucinations. They hear voices in their head and some even see ghosts and demons. The voices range from derogatory remarks: “You are worthless” or “You must die” to even commands to hurt others or even oneself. Such is the horror of this disease, that the patient finds it difficult to separate reality from fantasy.

Even though this devastating disorder can strike humans at any age, it is relatively rare in children and older adults. The age most prone to Schizophrenia is early adulthood, reaching a diagnostic peak between 16-25 years of age. The development of schizophrenic symptoms reaches a peak in females twice, first between 25-30 years, and then at around 40 years. For men a single peak of vulnerability is seen from 18-25 years. Unfortunately, those affected are often unable to cope with the daily horrors of Schizophrenia and the death rate increases after 30 years of age, particularly due to suicide.

Several case studies have been carried out in order to understand this mental disorder better. Schizophrenics report hearing constant voices in their heads telling them to do things. These voices are like those of unknown ghosts telling them vile things about themselves or about others around them. Many also report seeing disfigured faces and figures of the people that they are talking to. It really seems like Schizophrenics are constantly living in an unreal world full of horrors, ghosts and devils.

What makes it worse is that it cannot be completely avoided, like a horror movie, by leaving a movie theatre or switching off the TV set. Schizophrenics feel that their thoughts are channeled to others and that their actions are being controlled by an unknown dark and evil entity. All these things may sound completely bizarre, like a demonic possession to the lame man, but to those with apt knowledge, these are indeed signs of Schizophrenia. Even though Schizophrenic symptoms can be to an extent controlled with drugs, sadly they cannot yet be completely removed. This means that a schizophrenic is at the mercy of his or her hallucinations.

Scared, confused and utterly helpless, Schizophrenics face this turmoil on a daily basis. Hence, proper knowledge and early detection may help the patients get the right medical treatment and attention, for which a detailed idea of the symptoms is an absolute must.

**Signs & Symptoms**

To track this stalker of the human mind, there are indeed signs that we must watch out for! The most typical sign of schizophrenia is the tendency to have delusions, which means holding strange irrational beliefs that are unreal and far from reality. A patient may complain that he is being watched, or that someone wants to kill him or harm him in anyway. Even when presented with factual information, the patient continues to foster such false ideas and often loses sight of reality.

The other most potent signal is having hallucinations – auditory or visual – and sometimes both. Schizophrenics report hearing voices and seeing things, ranging from numbers, animals, people to even ghosts. They see them moving and talking and are as much a part of their world as everything real is. This makes it very hard for the schizophrenic to focus on reality and to discern the difference between reality and hallucinations. Often disorganized thinking and odd behavior is seen, inability to sustain attention and a lack of organized sustained function in general tasks is also observed.

Physical signs are also important. Schizophrenics have slow movements or sometimes even total immobility. There may be moments that a schizophrenic fails to register a joke and respond to it. They may lack the ability to feel pleasure. A general lack of emotion in facial expression and speech, along with problems in speech and communication is also observed. Often they may also be poorly motivated and show a lack of interest in doing general tasks.

Social withdrawal and a loss of both appetite and hygiene are also seen in patients. The most dangerous aspect of schizophrenia is depression that strikes the hardest and therefore accounts for the high attempted suicide rates in patients. So, the schizophrenics suffer from a cluster of symptoms that range from self destructive to sometimes violent.

What is of utmost importance is for the people in the vicinity to detect the cause, rather than reacting harshly to the person who might be the cause of such unpredictable or incomprehensible behavior. Early detection can lead to earlier care and medication that can help improve the life of the sufferer.

**Feature Article**

Ms Shoa Abbas Naqvi is pursuing her PhD. Address: c/o Prof. Naheed Banu, Department of Biochemistry, Faculty of Life Sciences, AMU-202001; Aligarh