Introduction

This manual is designed to guide family members and other caregivers in supporting their loved ones with schizophrenia through cognitive adaptation training (CAT) strategies. CAT is an organized approach that uses what clinicians call “environmental supports”: these are supports that are integrated into the routines and living spaces of people struggling with schizophrenia and other similar mental health challenges. The supports include a range of tools such as signs, alarms, calendars, checklists, schedules and pill containers for organizing belongings and carrying out daily activities. They are all methods to get around or compensate for some of the thinking and motivation difficulties that can occur with schizophrenia. While all of these strategies are derived from CAT, we will use the term “environmental supports” in this manual as a term that better reflects the tools being provided.

Simply put, by bypassing cognitive problems and overcoming some of the other challenges associated with schizophrenia, the person can more fully engage in life and in the recovery process. Environmental supports are like giving glasses to a person who has difficulty seeing. Glasses do not fix what is wrong with a person’s eyes, but they do allow the person to see more clearly.

Environmental supports can help to improve the person’s hygiene if that is an issue—and help them to dress more appropriately and feel better about their appearance. Supports can also help the person to more independently take medications as prescribed and have fewer symptoms of mental illness. And finally, they can help the person to better meet goals around employment, education, leisure and socializing so they can be more independent and have a fuller life.

This is the goal of this manual: to give you tools that you will use in collaboration with your loved one. The guide provides a set of strategies that you can work on together, personalized to your relative’s goals, strengths and areas of difficulty. These strategies are tried and tested approaches that we hope you find helpful as you bring them into your loved one’s home and work together to overcome some of the debilitating challenges of their illness. We hope that this approach will improve your own quality of life as well as that of the person you care for. Hopefully you will both benefit by being able to enjoy a relationship that is less affected by concerns about your relative’s well-being.

Training with this manual is designed to be accompanied by the videos (see them at www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com) to illustrate specific supports and how they are used to address specific problems. In the videos, we show two sets of individuals at different levels of functioning. We have Miles and his sister Jules, who has a type of schizophrenia in which she has trouble getting started on tasks. And we have Gita and her son Maleck, who has a type of schizophrenia in which he has trouble staying organized or completing tasks once he has got started. Each of the two pairs meets three times—in an
initial visit, a week later, and finally a few weeks after—to demonstrate strategies for someone needing low support, and then three times to demonstrate strategies for someone needing higher support.

Some readers will find it helpful to watch all the videos first, while others will prefer to watch individual clips as they read through the strategies, and see how the strategies are being enacted for the supports they are trying to put in place for their loved one. Although some of the material in the videos will make a lot more sense after reading the book, seeing this work in action can help you visualize what you are reading about. You can then go back and re-watch them and think about how it applies to the person you will be supporting. See Appendix 4 for a description of each video.

The manual is divided into seven sections. It moves from providing basic information about schizophrenia, to discussing how to identify and assess where to get started, to identifying specific strategies. We provide a range of tools that you can customize to your own situation—with supporting materials in appendices at the back of this guide and on the guide’s website www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com.

Please play with these strategies, testing what works and what doesn’t work with the goals and preferences of the person you are supporting. Not everything will work, but finding a few key approaches that do can make a big difference.