

Psychosis and Young People

The word psychosis is used to describe conditions that affect the mind, where there has been some loss of contact with reality. When someone becomes ill in this way it is called a psychotic episode.

Psychosis is most likely to occur in young adults and is quite common. Around 3 out of every 100 young people will experience a psychotic episode - making psychosis more common than diabetes in young people. Most make a full recovery from the experience.

Psychosis can happen to anyone. Like any other illness it can be treated.

What are the Symptoms?

Psychosis can lead to changes in mood and thinking and to abnormal ideas, making it hard to understand how the person feels.

In order to try to understand the experience of psychosis it is useful to group together some of the more characteristic symptoms.

Confused Thinking Everyday thoughts become confused or don't join up properly. Sentences are unclear or don't make sense. A person may have difficulty concentrating, following a conversation or remembering things. Thoughts seem to speed up or slow down.

False Beliefs It is common for a person experiencing a psychotic episode to hold false beliefs, known as delusions. The person is so convinced of their delusion that the most logical argument cannot make them change their mind. For example, someone may be convinced from the way cars are parked outside their house that they are being watched by the police.

Hallucinations In psychosis, the person sees, hears, feels, smells or tastes something that is not actually there. For example, they may hear voices that no one else can hear, or see things that aren't there. Things may taste or smell as if they are bad or even poisoned.

Changed Feelings How someone feels may change for no apparent reason. They may feel strange and cut off from the world with everything moving in slow motion. Mood swings are common and they may feel unusually excited or depressed. People's emotions seem dampened . . . they feel less than they used to, or show less emotion to those around them.

Changed Behaviour People with psychosis behave differently from the way they usually do. They may be extremely active or lethargic, sitting around all day. They may laugh inappropriately or become angry or upset without apparent cause. Often, changes in behaviour are associated with the symptoms already described above. For example, a person believing

they are in danger may call the police. Someone who believes he is Jesus Christ may spend the day preaching in the streets. People may stop eating because they are concerned that the food is poisoned, or have trouble sleeping because they are scared of something.

Symptoms vary from person to person and may change over time.

What are the Types of Psychosis?

Everyone's experience of psychosis is different and attaching a specific name or label to the psychotic illness is not always useful in the early stages.

However, when someone has a psychosis, a diagnosis of a particular psychotic illness is usually given. Diagnosis means identification of an illness by a person's symptoms and the diagnosis will depend on what brought on the illness and how long the symptoms last. When someone is experiencing a psychotic episode for the first time, it is particularly difficult to diagnose the exact type of psychosis, because many of the factors that determine the label remain unclear. Nevertheless, it is useful to be familiar with some of the labels that you might hear.

Drug-induced Psychosis Use of, or withdrawal from, alcohol and drugs can be associated with the appearance of psychotic symptoms. Sometimes these symptoms will rapidly resolve as the effects of the substances wear off. In other cases, the illness may last longer, but begin with drug-induced psychosis.

Organic Psychosis Sometimes psychotic symptoms may appear as part of a head injury or a physical illness that disrupts brain functioning, such as encephalitis, AIDS or a tumour. There are usually other symptoms present, such as memory problems or confusion.

Brief Reactive Psychosis Psychotic symptoms arise suddenly in response to a major stress in the person's life, such as a death in the family or change of living circumstance. Symptoms can be severe, but the person makes a quick recovery in only a few days.

Delusional Disorder The main problem is strong beliefs in things that are not true.

Schizophrenia refers to a psychotic illness in which the changes in behaviour or symptoms have been continuing for a period of at least six months. The symptoms and length of the illness vary from person to person. Contrary to previous beliefs, many people with schizophrenia lead happy and fulfilling lives, with many making a full recovery.

Schizophreniform Disorder This is just like schizophrenia except that the symptoms have lasted for less than six months.

Bipolar (Manic-depressive) Disorder In bipolar disorder, psychosis appears as part of a more general disturbance in mood, in which mood is characterised by extreme highs (mania) or lows (depression). When psychotic symptoms are present, they tend to fit in with the person's mood. For example, people who are depressed may hear voices telling them they should commit suicide. Someone who is unusually excited or happy may believe they are special and can perform amazing feats.

Schizoaffective Disorder This diagnosis is made when the person has concurrent or consecutive symptoms of both a mood disorder (such as depression or mania) and psychosis. In other words the picture is not typical of a mood disorder or schizophrenia.

Psychotic Depression This is severe depression with psychotic symptoms mixed in, but without periods of mania or highs occurring at any point during the illness. This distinguishes the illness from bipolar disorder.

What Causes Psychosis?

A number of theories have been suggested as to what causes psychosis, but there is still much research to be done.

There is some indication that psychosis is caused by a poorly understood combination of biological factors that create a vulnerability to experiencing psychotic symptoms during adolescence or early adult life. These symptoms often emerge in response to stress, drug abuse or social changes in such vulnerable individuals. Some factors may be more or less important in one person than in another.

In first-episode psychosis, the cause is particularly unclear. It is, therefore, necessary for the person to have a thorough examination to rule out known medical causes and make the diagnosis as clear as possible. This usually involves medical tests, as well as a detailed interview with a mental health specialist. Psychosis has many forms.

Course and outcome vary from person to person.

What can be done?

Effective treatments are readily available for psychotic illnesses. The earlier treatment is started, the quicker and better the recovery. With appropriate treatment the majority of young people who experience a psychotic illness will recover. However, for some young people, psychosis can become an episodic problem through their lives.

A person experiencing a psychotic illness will require specialist assistance. Treatment for psychosis involves the use of antipsychotic medication, individual coun-

selling, family support and counselling, practical support, and involvement in a recovery program which focuses on helping people get back on track. The focus of treatment is to control symptoms, assist the person to make sense of and overcome the trauma of their illness, and prevent relapse through decreasing risk factors such as stress, substance abuse, family conflict and stigma.

Whilst promoting protective factors such as: secure accommodation and income; engagement in work or study; strong social networks and family supports; and adherence to medication.

What can you do?

Young people experiencing a psychotic disorder are not always able to understand, or willing to explain what is happening to them. Most fear they will be labelled as "mad". Many do not seek help on their own. Workers working with young people may be in a position to identify a young person experiencing a psychotic disorder and assist the young person to get the help they need.

Advice and Referral

If you are working with a young person who you think may have a psychotic disorder and you are not sure what to do, it is always best to contact someone with experience in this field and discuss the situation with them. Treatment of psychotic disorders should be carried out by workers with training and experience in dealing with mental health problems.

Services at ORYGEN Youth Health

ORYGEN Youth Health is able to assist young people with a psychotic disorder through the Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre (EPPIC). EPPIC assists people between the ages of 15-24 (inclusive), with first episode psychosis who live in Western or Northwestern Melbourne.

To make a referral or get some advice contact the ORYGEN Triage worker on 1800 888 320 or via the paging service on 03 9483 4556.

For children and teenagers under 15 years of age contact RCH Mental Health Service 1800 445 511.

For further information regarding mental health and information in other languages visit:

- www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- www.sane.org.au
- www.healthinsite.gov.au