

What is Psychosis?

The word psychosis is used to describe conditions which 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 which no one else can hear, or see things which 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 is First-Episode Psychosis?

First-episode psychosis simply refers to the first time someone experiences psychotic symptoms or a psychotic episode. People experiencing a first-episode psychosis may not understand what is happening. The symptoms can be highly disturbing and completely unfamiliar, leaving the person confused and distressed. This distress is increased by negative myths and stereotypes about mental illness which are still common in the community.

A psychotic episode occurs in three phases. The length of each phase varies from person to person.

Phase 1: Prodrome

The early signs are vague and hardly noticeable. There may be changes in the way some people describe their feelings, thoughts and perceptions.

Phase 2: Acute

Clear psychotic symptoms are experienced, such as hallucinations, delusions or confused thinking.

Phase 3: Recovery

Psychosis is treatable and most people recover. The pattern of recovery varies from person to person.

People recover from first-episode psychosis, and many never experience another psychotic episode.

1

Information Sheet

INFO

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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 which determine the label remain unclear. Nevertheless, it is useful to be familiar with some of the labels which 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 which 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

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 which 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.

Further Information

Other information sheets are:

- ***Recovering From Psychosis - Information Sheet No 2***
- ***Getting Help Early - Information Sheet No 3***
- ***How Can I Help Someone With Psychosis? - Information Sheet No 4***

and are available from:

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