

How Can I Help Someone With Psychosis?

It can be very distressing to realise that someone close to you is experiencing psychosis. You may feel shocked, confused, bewildered and guilty. There is no right or wrong way to feel.

Recognising the problem may have been difficult, as it is easy to mistake early psychosis for the normal ups and downs of young people. You have lots of questions and may not know what to do next. You want to help, but are not sure how.

Where Can I Get Help?

It can be very confusing to know where to get help. Families, partners or friends find it hard to make the decision to obtain help for lots of reasons. The person experiencing a psychotic episode may not wish to get help or even acknowledge that they are unwell. It can be extremely hard to cope alone with a person who is in a psychotic state.

Help is needed for the unwell person to find out exactly what is happening and what type of treatment is required. Help is also needed for families, partners and friends so they can understand what is happening and find out how to be involved in the assessment, treatment and recovery process.

A good place to start is with your local doctor, community health centre or mental health service. They will tell you what to do next and where treatment can be obtained. Initially, your biggest concern will be understanding what is happening and getting the right sort of help.

If you have difficulty getting advice or help, or feel you are getting nowhere, you may need to shop around. Talk to your local doctor about the possibility of psychosis or contact advocacy and support agencies, such as Schizophrenia Fellowship or the Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill (ARAFEMI).

How Can I Help During Treatment?

Once you have found a professional or service experienced in dealing with psychosis you may find it useful to:

- Try to think of yourself and the professional as having the same goal to help the person with psychosis and work towards recovery. It is like a partnership between yourself and the treating person or team.
- Find out who else is in the treating team - ask for their names and contact numbers. Ask the staff specifically what their role is now and what it will be in the future. Ask who is the best person to contact and make a note of all this information.

- Ask for a meeting with the key people in the team and prepare a list of questions to take with you. Feel free to write the answers down at the meeting.
- Ask for regular meetings and obtain an appointment time for your next meeting. Ask for specific information. If you don't understand what you are being told, say so and ask for a clearer explanation.
- Ask where you can obtain additional information. For instance, are there specific education sessions you can attend or is there material available to read?

How Should I Relate to the Person Who is Ill?

If you are with a person when they are psychotic and behaving strangely, you may feel frightened or frustrated. It is important to remember that they are still your son, daughter, brother, sister, wife, husband, partner or friend. It is very difficult for a person who is ill to be how they usually are.

Often families and friends ask how they should behave and talk to a person who is psychotic. There are no set rules, however, some general guide lines can be helpful.

Be yourself.

Gain information and understand that the person may be behaving and talking differently due to the psychotic symptoms.

Understand that psychotic symptoms are stressful for everyone and that you may have a range of feelings - shock, fear, sadness, anger, frustration, despair.

Talking with other people will help you to deal with these feelings. Believe a person will recover - even if it takes time. Be patient.

When a person is in an acute stage they may seem child-like. Sometimes they need to be in a safe, comforting environment and sometimes they need others to help with decisions.

Try not to take it personally if a person says hurtful words to you when they are unwell.

When a person has acute psychotic symptoms they may be fixed in their beliefs and ideas. Don't get involved in a long disagreement, but listen with interest to gain an understanding of their current reality - to

show sympathy and for future reference, to discuss when they are better.

Take care of yourself. It is a balance between care and concern and not getting too run down yourself.

How Can I Help Recovery?

Family, partners and friends are very important in the process of recovery. When a person is recovering from their psychotic episode you can provide love, stability, understanding and reassurance, as well as help with practical issues.

However, you may need your own period of recovery and adjustment to all that has happened. It can be useful to understand some of the stages you may have gone through.

Common Stages

It is quite common for families and friends to go through the following stages:

1. Initially you may be in crisis as you become aware that something serious is happening and your family member or friend is unwell. You may feel very anxious, worried and frightened at this time.
2. As it becomes clear that something is not quite right you start to seek help. This is also a time where you may be adjusting to the fact that your family member or friend is unwell and the situation cannot be left to clear up by itself.
3. As you find help you will probably have lots of questions and worries - What is happening? What is psychosis? What causes it? Will this happen again? How is it treated? What can we do to help? What will we tell other people? Will our family member or friend understand why help was needed? Should we have got help earlier? You will have mixed emotions and reactions during this time. Any feeling you have is appropriate.
4. As the person begins to recover and starts to show signs of being well, you may experience great relief and pleasure. You may also have started to understand the illness more by this time and start to feel more hopeful about the future.
5. As recovery progresses you may find your anxiety, questions or worries start to increase again as your family member, partner or friend starts to reintegrate back into the family and community. Often family members find themselves watching the person for signs of relapse or strange behaviour. You may feel protective and anxious, wanting the patient to be well as quickly as possible and not do anything that may cause a relapse. It can be difficult balancing the needs for independence and care.
6. As recovery continues, there is a gradual adjustment by everyone concerned. You feel reassured that recovery is occurring and some normality returns to your life. You speak with the patient about psychosis, what it was like for everyone and how to help each other in the future.

Remember that families, partners and friends also need a period of recovery and time to understand and accept what has happened. Don't keep things a secret - talking with others, whether it be with family members, friends or professionals, can be very helpful.

Further Reading

There is a lot to learn about psychosis, treatment and recovery. You may find some of the following useful.

Alexander, K. (1991), *Understanding and coping with Schizophrenia*. Schizophrenia Fellowship of Victoria (1993) *Something is not quite right*. Schizophrenia Fellowship of Victoria (1994) *Psychosis - What is it?* Watkins, J. (1992), *Psychosis and Schizophrenia*.

The above publications are available from the Schizophrenia Fellowship of Victoria.

ARAFEMI Victoria (1991), *Moodswings and Mental Health*

The above booklet is available from ARAFEMI. There are self-help organisations in each state that can be of great assistance to families. These include:

Schizophrenia Fellowship

Provides information, education and support for relatives, and accommodation and rehabilitation programs for people with a mental illness.

ARAFEMI

Provides support groups for people with a psychiatric disability, as well as groups for relatives and friends of the emotionally and mentally ill.

Further Information

Other information sheets are:

- **What is Psychosis? - Information Sheet No 1**
- **Recovering From Psychosis - Information Sheet No 2**
- **Getting Help Early - Information Sheet No 3**

and are available from:

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