

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO...

Pay attention to changes in your son's or daughter's behaviours and abilities.

Be aware that a noticeable, persistent change to "who they usually are" or how they function could signal psychosis. Friends, teachers and others who know your child are also likely to notice such changes.

Trust yourself. You know your own child better than anyone. And you are your child's best advocate. If you believe that "something isn't quite right", keep looking until you find the help you need. Psychosis is not the only explanation for a young person's "odd" behaviours, but it's a serious possibility that must be considered.

Don't wait. Psychosis does not typically disappear on its own. If your son or daughter has psychosis, prompt and appropriate treatment is necessary – the sooner the better.

Seek help. Talk to your family doctor or a mental health professional. They can see that your son or daughter receives a thorough assessment. It is important to consult with a medical professional who is familiar with early psychosis. Some cities in Canada now have centres designed specifically for the treatment of early psychosis.

Get the facts. Learn more about psychosis in youth. Information is available. For example, visit the web site developed by the Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre (EPPIC) in Australia: www.vicnet.net.au/~eppic. Most public libraries provide free internet access.

Face your fears. To many, mental illness is a frightening thought. Unfortunately, this fear can discourage people from seeking help early. But neither denial of the problem nor delay will help a young person with psychosis. Much of the fear surrounding mental illness is based on myths and misunderstandings. Mental illness need not be feared. Like other medical conditions, mental illness needs to be treated.

Persistent changes in behaviour, personality or functioning may indicate psychosis.

Psychosis is treatable.

Visit the CMHA National Office
website: www.cmha.ca

Acknowledgements

EPPIC Early Psychosis Training Pack, Gardiner-Caldwell Communications Ltd., 1997.

Nova Scotia Hospital Information Sheets, 1997.

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Youth and Psychosis

What Parents Should Know...



CANADIAN MENTAL
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L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

“It was hard to believe. My son had been so spontaneous, funny, bright. He seemed to have everything going. Then the picture just changed so drastically. At first, the illness was overwhelming.”

PARENTS CAN HELP...

Psychosis is a serious but treatable medical condition affecting the brain. It is characterized by some loss of contact with reality and can dramatically change a person's thoughts, beliefs, perceptions and/or behaviours. Psychosis is estimated to affect up to 3% of the population. Males and females are affected equally.

It is difficult to know the cause of psychosis the first time it occurs. Psychosis is associated with a number of medical conditions including schizophrenia, depression, bipolar (manic depressive) disorder, and substance abuse, among others. As well, members of families with a history of psychotic illness are at risk for developing psychosis themselves.

While psychosis can happen to anyone, symptoms of psychosis most often develop during adolescence and young adulthood. It can be an extremely distressing condition for the individuals affected, and for their families and friends. Without prompt and effective treatment, psychosis can derail young lives.

Many young people who develop psychosis are still residing with their families. Because of this, parents and other family members can play an important role in helping to identify the signs of psychosis, in seeking out treatment and in promoting the recovery process.

“The people who have the breakdown are not the ones who are necessarily aware of it. It's the people around them. And it's the people around them who need to know what the signs are and how to get help.”

THERE ARE SIGNS...

A person with psychosis may experience one or more of the following symptoms:

- hear voices that no one else hears
- see things that aren't there
- believe that others can influence their thoughts, or that they can influence the thoughts of others
- believe that they are being watched, followed or persecuted by others
- feel their thoughts have sped up or slowed down

Often there are other signs that family members or friends might notice, such as:

- withdrawal and loss of interest in socializing
- loss of energy or motivation
- problems with memory and concentration
- deterioration in work or study
- lack of attention to personal hygiene
- confused speech or difficulty communicating
- lack of emotional response or inappropriate emotional display
- general suspiciousness
- sleep or appetite disturbances
- unusual behaviours

“We thought our daughter was just lazy. She wouldn't do anything. So we'd get annoyed and get on her case. If we'd known she was ill, we wouldn't have pushed her. The stress just probably made it worse.”

Sometimes symptoms appear suddenly and are very obvious to everyone. But, psychosis can also emerge gradually, making it difficult to spot early signs and symptoms. Early identification can also be difficult because the teen years typically are marked by upheavals in behaviour, motivation and mood. But in fact, parents of youth with psychosis often remark in hindsight that they knew “something wasn't quite right”; that their child “just wasn't himself”.

If you see persistent changes that strike you as odd, don't wait. Trust your instincts. Get help.

“We saw things happening. His friends did. His brothers did. They thought it was drugs and thought ‘we'd better keep it from mum and dad, we don't want them to get upset’. But when I started seeing things happening – the monotone voice, the way he walked – just so much was happening within a six month period, I thought ‘there is something wrong here’.”

WITH TREATMENT THERE'S HOPE...

Untreated psychosis is associated with a more difficult recovery and can lead to increased family distress, substance abuse, depression and increased risk of suicide.

Proper early treatment reduces the need for hospitalization and promotes full recovery. Treatment consists of low-dose, anti-psychotic medications, education, training and support. Newer medications can effectively treat psychotic symptoms without the side effects common in the past. Young people with psychosis are encouraged to maintain their routines as much as possible. Recovery is also improved when the family itself is accepting, non-confrontational and supportive; stress can make psychosis worse.

Psychosis is nobody's fault. It can happen to anyone. It is important to seek help as soon as symptoms appear.

Psychosis is a medical condition that responds well to treatment. With prompt and appropriate treatment, most people will recover fully.