



The word **psychosis** is used to describe symptoms that affect a person's beliefs, thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Psychosis can cause someone to misinterpret or confuse what is going on around them. For example, a person who is experiencing psychosis may hear voices when alone but the voice is heard internally and so is very real to him/her. When someone becomes unwell in this way it is called a psychotic episode. An episode is a period of time when someone is having symptoms of psychosis that interferes with normal day to day life. Psychosis is most likely to occur in late adolescence or in the early adult years. Psychosis can be treated and most people make a full recovery from the experience.

### What are the Symptoms?

It is different for different people and someone may have a range of symptoms or just one. Some of the symptoms of psychosis are listed below:

#### Confused Thinking

Everyday thoughts become confused or don't join up properly making sentences unclear or hard to understand. A person may have difficulty concentrating, following a conversation or remembering things. Thoughts can 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 the delusion that the most logical argument cannot change their mind. For example, someone may be convinced from the way cars are parked outside their house that the house is being watched by the police.

#### Hallucinations

In psychosis a person may see, hear, feel, smell or taste something that is not actually there. For example, hearing voices that no one else can hear, or seeing 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 obvious 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. A person may seem to feel less or show less emotion to those around them.

#### Changed Behaviour

A person with psychosis may behave differently from usual. A person may be extremely active or have difficulty getting the energy to do things. He/she may laugh when things don't seem funny or become angry or upset without apparent cause. Often, changes in behaviour are associated with the symptoms already described above. For example, someone who believes he is Jesus Christ may spend the day preaching in the streets or may stop eating because of concern that food is poisoned, or have trouble sleeping because of being scared of something.

#### Drug-induced Psychosis

Using or withdrawing from alcohol or drugs can lead to psychotic symptoms. Sometimes these symptoms will rapidly disappear as the effects of the drugs/alcohol wears off. In other cases, the illness may last longer.

#### 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 situation. The person makes a quick recovery in only a few days.

#### Schizophrenia

Refers to a psychotic illness in which the changes in behaviour or symptoms have been continuing for a period of at least 6 months. Contrary to previous beliefs, many people with

**Psychosis *can* be treated and most people make a full recovery from the experience.**

### 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. Sometimes, though, giving a diagnosis can be helpful in knowing what treatment to provide.

When someone has 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.

schizophrenia lead happy and fulfilling lives, with many making a full recovery.

***It is not a 'split personality', as it has sometimes been referred to in movies or the media.***

#### Schizophreniform Disorder

This is just like schizophrenia except that the symptoms have lasted for less than 6 months.

#### Bipolar (Manic-depressive) Disorder

Someone usually experiences changes in mood by having extreme highs (mania) or lows (depression).

People with this condition may also develop psychotic symptoms when in the high or low mood phases. 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 things.

### Schizoaffective Disorder

This diagnosis is made when the person has 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.

### What Causes Psychosis?

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

There is some indication that psychosis is caused by a combination of inherited biological factors that may make someone more vulnerable (more likely) to experience psychotic symptoms. Symptoms can happen in response to stress, drug use, environmental factors or social changes in such vulnerable individuals but again, it is different for different people.



## What can you do to help a young person with psychosis?

- > Try to be calm and supportive as it can be a frightening and confusing time for a young person who is experiencing psychosis. If you see persistent changes in the young person and are worried then seek help from your GP or local mental health service.
- > *Support the young person to get professional treatment as early as possible as this helps in reducing the effects of psychosis and aids recovery.*
- > It may be helpful to assist the young person practically so that the situation around them remains as safe and secure as possible. This may mean helping them to pay bills/rent and assisting them to get to appointments, as people who are experiencing psychosis sometimes find it more difficult to be organised.
- > If a young person is expressing thoughts of harming themselves then call your local mental health service, CATT (Crisis, Assessment and Treatment Team) or hospital so that the young person receives urgent specialist mental health support.
- > It is important to remember that the young person experiencing psychosis may be responding to things that are real to them but do not make sense to you. Being there for a young person and understanding that the illness may be influencing their actions can help. There are support groups for family and friends of people with psychosis that may also be helpful to you as supporting a person experiencing psychosis can be stressful.

**SUPPORT**

### Advice and Referral

Young people experiencing psychosis 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 psychosis and assist the young person to get the help they need. If you are working with a young person who you think may be experiencing psychosis 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 psychosis should be carried out by workers with training and experience in dealing with mental health problems.

### Services at Orygen Youth Health - Clinical Program (OYH-CP)

[www.oyh.org.au](http://www.oyh.org.au)

**Orygen Youth Health Clinical program** is able to assist young people with psychosis 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 north-western metropolitan Melbourne. To make a referral or get some advice contact the **OYH-CP** Triage worker ph. 1800 888 320 or via the paging service ph. 03 9483 4556.

For children and teenagers under 15 years of age living in Western or Northwestern Metropolitan Melbourne contact RCH Mental Health Service on 1800 445 511.

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

> [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

> [www.sane.org.au](http://www.sane.org.au)

> [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)



## What can you do as a young person who may be experiencing psychosis?

- > *Try to seek help as soon as possible.*
- > Tell someone you trust such as a parent, teacher or friend if you are having some strange experiences you cannot explain. Treatment for psychosis is available and the earlier you seek help then the better the outcome and the quicker the recovery.
- > Most GPs (local doctor) and mental health clinicians at your local mental health service know a lot about the early signs of psychosis and will be able to help you get treatment if it's needed. Treatment for psychosis can involve the use of medication, education about psychosis, counselling, family support and practical support (such as helping a young person get back to school or work). There are ways of trying to prevent symptoms of psychosis returning such as not using drugs, reducing stress and adopting good ways of coping with stress. A counsellor, GP or mental health clinician can provide you with some tips on how to get better at coping with stress.