

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. Most make a full recovery from the experience.

Psychosis can happen to anyone. An episode of psychosis is treatable, and it is possible to recover.

What are the symptoms?

Psychosis can lead to changes in mood and thinking and to abnormal ideas. In order to try and 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. Mood swings are common and they may feel unusually excited or depressed. A person's emotions feel dampened and they may show less emotion to those around them.

Changed behaviour

People with psychosis may behave differently from the way they usually do. They may be extremely active or lethargic. 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. A person may stop eating because they are concerned that the food is poisoned, or have trouble sleeping because they are scared.

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 may not understand what is happening. The symptoms can be highly disturbing and unfamiliar, leaving the person confused and distressed. Unfortunately negative myths and stereotypes about mental illness and psychosis in particular 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 may be vague and hardly noticeable. There may be changes in the way some people describe their feelings, thoughts and perceptions, which may become more difficult over time.

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.

In spite of common misperceptions, recovery from a first episode of psychosis is more probable than possible, and with the right help many never experience another psychotic episode.

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.

A diagnosis is a form of medical shorthand, which identifies the type of psychosis based on symptoms and course of the illness.

When someone is experiencing a psychotic episode for the first time it is particularly difficult to diagnose the exact type of psychosis. A firm diagnosis requires longitudinal consistency in the psychotic symptoms.

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 a drug-induced psychosis.

Organic Psychosis

Sometimes psychotic symptoms may appear as part of a head injury or a physical illness which disrupts brain functioning. 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

In delusional disorder, the main symptom is a firmly held belief 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 fulfilling lives, with many learning to effectively manage their illness.

Schizophreniform disorder

This is similar to schizophrenia except that the symptoms have lasted for less than six months.

Bipolar Disorder

In bipolar disorder, psychosis appears as part of a more general disturbance in mood, in which mood is characterised by extreme highs and lows in mood. 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 extremely elevated in

mood may believe they have special abilities, which are out of keeping with their normal functioning.

Schizoaffective Disorder

This diagnosis is made when the person has symptoms of both mood disorder and psychosis. The picture is not typical of either a mood disorder or schizophrenia.

Psychotic Depression

This is major depression with psychotic symptoms mixed in, but without periods of elevated mood 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 combination of biological factors in early development which creates a vulnerability to experiencing psychotic symptoms during adolescence or early adult life. Symptoms are triggered in response to stress, substance use or social changes in vulnerable individuals. Some factors may be more or less important in different individuals.

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

Further Information

Other information sheets are:

- Getting Help Early – Fact Sheet 2
- Recovering from Psychosis – Fact Sheet 3
- How Can I help Someone with Psychosis? – Fact Sheet 4

The EPPIC Information Sheets can be downloaded from either the EPPIC website www.eppic.org.au or the ORYGEN Youth Health website www.orygen.org.au and distributed freely without alterations.

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