

It can be very distressing to realise that someone close to you is experiencing psychosis. You may feel shocked, confused, bewildered, or 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 that young people go through. 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 young 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. These services are listed in your local phone directory. They will tell you what to do next and where treatment can be obtained. Initially, your biggest concern will be becoming clear about what is happening and getting the right sort of help.

If you have difficulty getting advice or help, or feel you are getting nowhere, feel free to contact advocacy and support agencies such as the Mental Illness Fellowship (formerly Schizophrenia Fellowship), or the Association of Relatives and Friends of the Emotionally and Mentally Ill (ARAFEMI). These services are listed in the business section of your phone directory.

## 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, which is to help the person with psychosis recover. It can be like a partnership between yourself and the treating team.
- Find out who else is in the treating team – ask for their names and how to contact them by phone. Ask the staff specifically what their role is in the young person's

treatment. Ask who is the best person to keep in contact with, and keep that information handy.

- 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 down the answers 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 clearer explanations.
- Ask where you can obtain additional information. For instance, are there specific information sessions you can attend about psychosis, and is there material available to read?
- If cannabis or other substance misuse is a problem for the young person, ask the treating team what can be done about it, and most importantly, talk it over with the young person themselves. Ask the young person if they think that substance misuse will delay recovery. Let them know where you stand about their substance use.

## 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 bewildered. 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 acutely ill to be the person 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 guidelines 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 the person will recover – even if it takes some time. Be patient.
- > When a person is in the midst of an acute episode 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 the person says hurtful words to you when they are unwell.

- > When a person has acute psychotic symptoms they may seem fixed in their beliefs and ideas. Don't get involved in long disagreements, 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.
- > Above all, 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.

It may also be useful to get in touch with family and carer support agencies, such as ARAFEMI, Mental Illness Fellowship, or the Carer's Network. Again, these agencies are listed alphabetically in the business section of your phone directory.

## 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 to your family member or friend. You may feel very anxious, worried and frightened.
2. As it becomes more 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 recover by itself.
3. As you find help you will probably have lots of questions and worries – What is happening? Is it 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 is needed? Should we have got help earlier? You will have mixed emotions and reactions during this time. Any feeling you have is OK in the circumstances.
4. As the person begins to recover and starts to show signs of being well, you may experience great relief. 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 or friend starts to reintegrate back into the family or community. Often family members find themselves watching the person for signs of relapse or strange behaviour. You may feel protective and anxious, wanting the person 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 life. You can speak with them about psychosis, what it is 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 is with family members, friends or professionals, can be very helpful.

## Further Information

Other information sheets are:

- What is Psychosis? – Fact Sheet 1
- Getting Help Early – Fact Sheet 2
- Recovering From Psychosis – Fact Sheet 3

The EPPIC Information Sheets can be downloaded from either the EPPIC website [www.eppic.org.au](http://www.eppic.org.au) or the ORYGEN Youth Health website [www.orygen.org.au](http://www.orygen.org.au) and distributed freely without alterations.

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