

Psychosis

What is the issue?

Psychosis is a condition which impairs a person's sense of reality. This may be from a mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (manic depression). Symptoms of psychosis can also at times be caused by brain injury or infection, alcohol or drug misuse. Most young people recover from psychosis to live full and satisfying lives.

No-one knows for sure what causes psychotic illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. The first signs often appear in late adolescence and early adulthood and may begin gradually.

The earliest phase of a psychotic disorder can last from a few weeks to up to 2 years. Initially, vague changes may occur in the way a person thinks, feels and behaves. At first these signs may be barely noticeable. A young person in this phase may experience confused thinking, withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities and deterioration in school performance.

Psychosis may affect a young person's ability to concentrate or their thoughts might seem faster or slower than usual. A young person experiencing these changes may feel very confused and distressed by what is happening.

Psychosis can happen to anyone, but like other illness, it can be treated.

Early warning signs

The early signs of psychosis may be difficult to detect and can be mistaken for normal changes of adolescence. Noticeable and persistent changes in the young person's behaviour and moods should not be ignored.

The early warning signs in young people are:

- Changes in *thinking* - difficulty in concentrating, poor memory, preoccupation with odd ideas, increased suspiciousness.
- Changes in *mood* - lack of emotional response, rapid mood changes, inappropriate moods.
- Changes in *behaviour* - odd or unusual behaviour.
- *Physical changes* - sleep disturbance or excessive sleep and loss of energy.
- *Social changes* - withdrawal or isolation from friends and family.
- *Changes in functioning* - decline in school or work performance.

The term psychosis refers to a group of disorders which impair a person's sense of reality and may lead to changes in their mood. A person's perceptions can be affected by hallucinations. As well, their thinking may seem confused, slowed down or speeded up. They may have persistent false beliefs known as delusions. The symptoms vary for each person and may change over time. Psychosis may begin in adolescence. It can happen to anyone but like most other illness it can be treated.

Helping young people with psychosis

Young people with first onset psychosis may be reluctant to seek treatment because they don't think anything is wrong or they hope their symptoms will go away. Help is needed for the young person to find out what is happening and what treatment is required. Families also need help to understand what is happening and how they can help.

It is important to get help as early as possible as this improves recovery for young people. The impact of psychosis can be very traumatic for the young person and disrupt their life at a critical developmental stage. The longer it takes to receive effective treatment, the longer it is likely to take for symptoms to go away and the greater the risk of further episodes.

It is a good idea to arrange a check-up with your doctor to ensure that there are no other serious physical or emotional problems which may require treatment.

Most young people with psychosis are treated in the community by mental health professionals. This minimises distress and disruption for the young person and their family. Having someone to talk to is an important part of treatment. Mental health workers understand what is happening and can provide reassurance and information for the young person and their family.

Medication is often a part of the treatment of psychosis to assist recovery and prevent further episodes. A psychiatrist can determine if medication is needed. There are several different types of medication that may be recommended and young people usually start on very low doses.

Most young people recover from psychosis to live full and satisfying lives.

Programs to recognise psychosis in young people and offer help at the earliest stages are being set up across NSW.

Does anyone recover from psychosis?

Recovery may vary for each person with some returning quickly to their usual lifestyle while others may take months or longer to get back on track.

Family and friends may help the young person's recovery by:

- Finding out about the signs and effects of psychosis.
- Offering support and encouragement.
- Allowing the young person time for recovery and return to school, university, work or job training.
- Obtaining support for themselves.

Where to get help:

In an emergency contact your

- general practitioner or local hospital Emergency Department
- Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians and child psychologists.

24 hour telephone services are:

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
Lifeline 131 114

Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill (ARAFMI) and Young ARAFMI
24 hr support line: (02) 9805 1883
Rural Areas: 1800 655 198

For other help, the first point of contact can be:

- Your local Area Health Service (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services

If you would like more information about mental health and services contact:

NSW Association for Mental Health, Mental Health Information Service
Monday to Friday, 12.30pm - 4.30pm
Phone: (02) 9816 5688
Rural areas: 1800 674 200

Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW
Tel: (02) 9878 2053