



Psychosis



About this leaflet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, carers, professionals and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. This factsheet describes psychosis.



What is psychosis?

Young people often worry that they may be 'going mad' when they are feeling stressed, confused or very upset. In fact, worries like this are rarely a sign of mental illness. 'Psychosis' is when your thoughts are so disturbed that you lose touch with reality. This type of problem can be severe and distressing.

How common is it?

Psychosis affects people of all ages, but is rare before you reach the older teenage years.

What causes psychosis?

When you have a psychotic episode, it can be a signal of another underlying illness. You can have a psychotic episode after a stressful event like losing a close friend or relative. It can also be the result of a physical illness (like a severe infection), the use of illegal drugs (like cannabis) or a severe mental illness (like schizophrenia or Bipolar disorder). Sometimes it is difficult to know what caused the illness.

How do I know if I have psychosis?

When you have psychosis, you will usually experience very unusual and sometimes unpleasant thoughts and experiences. They may appear suddenly making you feel really frightened. They can also creep in so gradually that only people like your close family and friends notice you are behaving strangely.

You may experience one or more of the symptoms below:

- **Unusual beliefs called 'delusions'**. These are very strong beliefs which are obviously untrue to others, but not to you. For example, when you are ill you may think that there is a plot to harm you or that you are being spied on by the TV or being taken over by aliens. Sometimes you may feel you have special powers.
- **Thought disorder**. This is when you cannot think straight. Your ideas may seem jumbled, but it is more than being muddled or confused. Other people will find it very difficult to follow what you say.
- **Unusual experiences called 'hallucinations'**. These are when you can see, hear, smell or feel something that isn't really there. The most common hallucination that people have is hearing voices. Hallucinations are very real to the person having them. This can be very frightening and can make you believe that you are being watched or picked on.



Having these strange thoughts and experiences can affect you at school, home or when with friends. You may find it difficult to concentrate and enjoy your usual activities. They can even affect your sleep and appetite.

How do I get help?

It is important that you seek help early. The earlier you are treated for psychosis, the quicker you can get back to your normal life.

Firstly, you could talk to your family, school nurse or GP. They may get you specialist help from a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) team or an Early Intervention Team or Service (EIS) - a specialist team for young people with psychosis.

With psychosis, you often don't realise that you are unwell, which means the people around you might notice it first. If you become very unwell, you could need some time in hospital until your condition stabilises.

What is the treatment for psychosis?

Medications called 'antipsychotics' are an important part of treatment. They may need to be taken for a long time in order to stay well. As with medication of any kind, there can be side-effects; the doctor you see will be able to advise you on these and what can be done to help.

If the psychosis is related to drug use or an underlying physical illness, you may need specific help and treatment to manage this.

Other forms of treatment are also important. You and your family will need help to understand more about your illness, how to manage it, and how to help prevent it coming back. You may need support to rebuild your confidence to continue with school, college or work.

Talking treatments can be helpful as well, but need to be in addition to medication.

What will happen in the future?

Most young people with early help and treatment recover from their psychotic episode. If the illness is due to an underlying physical illness or the use of drugs, you might avoid having another episode by taking the right treatment and avoiding using drugs.

It is often difficult to know what the long-term effects of a psychotic episode will be, and a definite diagnosis may not be possible straight away.

Is there anything else I should do?

It is important to continue with any treatment advised by your doctor and keep a balanced, healthy lifestyle.

Talking to others when you feel stressed can help in identifying problems early and getting the right treatment.



Luke, 16, talks about psychosis

“I was about 14 when it happened. I had a good family, did well at school and had group of good friends. Life had been good to me although my mum said I could not handle stress. I would be a bag of nerves before exams, was scared of failing and could not face is someone was unwell.

Uncle Rob’s death a year back in the accident was just too much. I knew I would feel upset for a long time. But then I didn’t feel upset. It was strange. I thought people were doing strange things to me like controlling me through radio signals. I felt I had lost control of myself and even felt my body was changing in a strange sort of way... not just the puberty. And then I could not face school, I was swearing, felt muddled in my head. My learning

mentor got worried and spoke to my mum, who had noticed my strange behaviour. I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t be bothered about going out. I didn’t like the idea of seeing a psychiatrist from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and I thought they would judge me. But it was very different. She seemed to know and understand how I felt, what I thought. I felt relieved. She even said I was not going to be locked away in a hospital. It was just an illness for which I needed to take medication for few months or year.

She then introduced me to Kay, a worker from Early Intervention Psychosis team. Kay explained to me and my family all about psychosis, what we could to keep me well. She was there when I felt I was losing it before my exams. It’s nearly a year now. I am like any other 16 year old, going to school, with friends etc... I take my meds and staying away from drugs and alcohol.”



Further information

Changing Minds: A Multimedia CD-ROM about Mental Health is intended for 13–17 year olds; it talks about addiction, stress, eating disorders, depression, schizophrenia and self-harm.

Epic friends - mental health problems are common. This website is all about helping you to help your friends who might be struggling emotionally.

Rethink Mental Illness

Offers help to people with severe mental illness (not only schizophrenia) and their carers.

Talk to Frank

Helps you find out everything you might want to know about drugs (and some stuff you don’t).

YoungMinds

Information to young people about mental health and emotional well-being. YoungMinds have also developed **HeadMeds** gives young people in England general information about medication. HeadMeds does **not** give you medical advice. Please talk to your Doctor or anyone else who is supporting you about your own situation because everyone is different.



References

Rutter's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Fifth Edition (2008). Publisher: Wiley-Blackwell.

The Young Mind: an essential guide for parents, teachers and young adults

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