

## Psychosis explained

Approximately three in 100 people will experience a psychotic episode at some point in their life. Some people only experience a few episodes of psychosis or a brief episode that lasts for a few days or weeks. Others will experience symptoms more frequently, in association with a longer term illness such as schizophrenia. The first episode of psychosis usually occurs in a person's late teens or early 20s.

### Psychotic symptoms

#### Confused thinking and psychosis

In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused. People with psychosis may believe:

- Their thoughts are being interfered with
- They can influence the thoughts of others
- Other people can read their thoughts.

These disturbances in thinking can impair a person's ability to concentrate, remember things and to make plans. These effects can persist, even after the psychotic episode has subsided.

#### Delusions and psychosis

Delusions are false beliefs that are not shared by others. Delusions can take various forms:

- **Paranoid delusion** – for example, the person believes they are being watched and singled out for some harmful purpose.
- **Grandiose delusion** – for example, the person believes they have special powers or that they are an important religious or political figure.
- **Depressive delusion** – for example, the person believes they are guilty of some terrible crime.

#### Hallucinations and psychosis

A hallucination is when someone hears, sees, smells or tastes something that isn't there. A common form of hallucination is to hear voices that aren't there. Hallucinations can lead to agitation, distress and even hostility.

#### Low motivation and psychosis

The effect of psychotic symptoms on the brain can make it difficult for a person to translate thought into action. They may become very lethargic (sluggish). Even getting up in the morning or doing the dishes may feel like impossible hurdles.

#### Changed feelings

Psychosis can lead to changes in emotions. It may become difficult for the person to:

- Communicate their feelings
- Distinguish what their emotions are

- Know how to react to things.

## Types of psychotic illness

There are many factors which can produce psychotic symptoms. Some examples are:

- **Brief reactive psychosis** – psychotic symptoms lasting less than a month and due to a very stressful event.
- **Drug induced psychosis** – caused by drugs like speed, LSD, marijuana, ecstasy or magic mushrooms. The symptoms last until the effects of the drugs wear off (hours or days).
- **Schizophrenia** – most people affected by schizophrenia experience a range of psychotic symptoms and commonly have difficulty organising their thoughts.
- **Bipolar disorder** - involves very extreme moods (either very high or very low) that can lead to psychotic symptoms.
- **Severe depression** – depression can be so intense that it causes psychotic symptoms.

## What causes psychosis?

The causes of psychosis are not fully understood. It is likely that psychosis is caused by a combination of hereditary and other factors. Psychosis may be associated with a chemical imbalance in the brain. Stress and certain drugs (for example, marijuana, speed or LSD) can trigger the first episode of psychosis.

## Diagnosis of psychosis

When someone experiences an episode of psychosis, a full medical examination is required. A period of observation by a team of mental health professionals will be necessary (either in the home or in hospital). Psychosis caused by drugs or other diseases will be checked for first.

## Treatment for psychosis

Treatment can do much to relieve, or even eliminate, the symptoms of psychosis. Treatments include:

- **Medication** – certain medications help the brain to restore its normal chemical balance.
- **Community support programs** – ongoing support is needed to help a person with psychosis to keep living independently in the community. Support may include help with accommodation, finding suitable work, and assistance with the development of social and personal skills.

A long period of convalescence from an episode (weeks, months or even longer) may be needed.

## Where to get help

- SANE Helpline. Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- Your doctor.

## Things to remember

- People experiencing psychosis are unable to distinguish what is real.
- Psychosis is associated with a number of illnesses that affect the brain.
- Medication and community support can relieve, or even eliminate, psychotic symptoms.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

SANE Australia

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