

Psychosis

+ YOUNG PEOPLE



'Psychosis' is a term for a range of symptoms where a person's beliefs, thoughts, feelings, senses, and behaviours are altered. Psychosis can cause someone to misinterpret or confuse what's going on around them. An episode of psychosis is a period where someone has more intense or severe symptoms of psychosis that last for more than a week and that interfere with their day-to-day life.

Overall, about 50% of people who develop a psychotic disorder will do so by the time they are in their early 20s. It can be treated and many people can make a good recovery. Most people have a period of time leading up to the onset of an episode of psychosis, in which they start to experience these symptoms, but less frequently or less severely. The earlier these symptoms are recognised and help sought, the better for recovery.

What are the symptoms of psychosis?

Psychosis can lead to changes in mood, thinking, and to abnormal ideas. Some of the characteristic symptoms can be grouped together to help to understand the experience of psychosis. Symptoms vary from person to person and may change over time. Some of the common symptoms are included below.

Confused thinking

Everyday thoughts become confused or don't join up properly. This can make someone's speech unclear or hard to understand. A person may have difficulty concentrating, following a conversation or remembering things. Thoughts can seem to speed up or slow down.

Delusions, or false beliefs

A person experiencing an episode of psychosis may hold false beliefs – these are also known as delusions. A 'delusion' is a strongly held belief in something that is false and not in line with a person's usual beliefs. The person is so convinced of their delusion that even the most logical argument can't make them change their mind. For example, someone may be convinced from the way cars are parked outside their house that the police are watching them. Or someone might believe that they have special powers, that a device implanted in them is tracking their movements, or that stories in the media are specifically about them.

Hallucinations

A hallucination is when a person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes something that's not actually there. They may hear voices that no one else can hear, or see things that aren't there, or find that things taste or smell as if they are bad or even poisoned.

Changed feelings

How someone feels may change for no apparent reason. Someone might feel strange, cut off from the world, or as if everything is moving in slow motion. Mood swings are common in people experiencing symptoms of psychosis, and they may feel unusually excited, depressed, or seem to feel or show less emotion than those around them.

Changed behaviour

People with psychosis may behave differently from the way they usually do. They may be extremely active or feel tired and have no energy to do things. They might laugh when things don't seem funny, or become angry or upset for no clear reason. Often, changes in behaviour are associated with the other symptoms of psychosis. A person believing they're in danger may call the police, or someone who believes they're Jesus Christ may spend the day preaching in the streets.

Psychosis can lead to changes in mood, thinking, and to abnormal ideas

What is a first episode of psychosis?

Everyone's experience of psychosis is different, and giving a specific label or diagnosis isn't always useful in the early stages.

A first episode of psychosis simply refers to the first time someone experiences an episode of psychosis. Young people experiencing a first episode may not understand what's happening, so the symptoms can be highly disturbing and unfamiliar, leaving them confused and distressed.

Unfortunately, negative myths and stereotypes about mental ill-health – and psychosis in particular – are still common in the community. Despite such common misperceptions, people often recover from a first episode of psychosis, and with the right help, many never experience another episode.

What are the kinds of psychoses?

When a young person experiences an episode of psychosis for the first time it's particularly difficult to diagnose the exact kind. The diagnosis depends on the kind and patterns of symptoms, how long the symptoms last and understanding the factors that may have brought on the onset of psychosis.

Here are some of the common diagnoses that may be used. Please note that the symptoms a person is experiencing may not always exactly fit a specific diagnosis.

Substance or medication-induced

Using or withdrawing from alcohol or drugs or, in some cases, medications, can cause symptoms of psychosis. These symptoms can disappear as the substance wears off, or may last longer.

Schizophrenia

The symptoms of psychosis, and length of the episode, varies from person to person. Usually, a young person who has behavioural changes or symptoms lasting for at least six months can be diagnosed with schizophrenia. Unlike what you might have seen in the media or on TV, schizophrenia doesn't mean split personality. Contrary to previous beliefs, many people with schizophrenia learn to effectively manage their symptoms and lead happy and fulfilling lives.

Schizophreniform disorder

This condition presents with symptoms just like schizophrenia except that the symptoms have lasted for less than six months.

Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder is characterised by extreme changes in mood, behaviour and thinking. It usually involves repeated periods of depression, and at least one period of mania. 'Mania' is an extreme high-mood state where people might have increased energy, poor judgment, difficulty sleeping, or display inappropriate behaviour.

People with this condition may develop symptoms of psychosis during an episode of depression or mania. For example, a young person who's experiencing a depressive episode may hear voices telling them they are worthless, or someone who is unusually excited or happy may believe they are special and can perform amazing things when experiencing periods of mania.

Major depressive disorder with symptoms of psychosis

This condition is characterised by severe depression with symptoms of psychosis, but without any periods of mania occurring during the illness.

Schizoaffective disorder

Schizoaffective disorder is when someone has symptoms of both schizophrenia and a mood disorder (either major depression or bipolar). The diagnosis of this disorder can be difficult because the symptoms are similar to schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Unlike the type of psychosis that occurs in bipolar disorder or major depression with symptoms of psychosis

(see the two diagnoses above), someone diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder can experience symptoms of psychosis when they are *not currently* experiencing an episode of depression or mania.

Psychotic disorder due to another medical condition

Sometimes symptoms of psychosis may appear as a result of a head injury or a physical illness that disrupts brain functioning. There are usually other symptoms present, such as memory problems or confusion.

Delusional disorder

The main symptom of a delusional disorder is a firmly held belief in things that are not true. Other symptoms, such as hallucinations and confused thinking, are not present.

Brief psychotic disorder

In this disorder, symptoms of psychosis develop suddenly within two weeks, and are not due to substance use or another medical condition. Symptoms can be severe, but the person makes a quick recovery and returns to normal functioning within a month.

What causes psychosis?

Scientific research hasn't been able to completely explain how psychosis develops. The most widely accepted explanation is the 'stress-vulnerability' model. This model suggests that a combination of biological and psychosocial factors in early development can increase a young person's 'vulnerability' to experiencing symptoms of psychosis.

Symptoms are triggered in response to 'stress', such as traumatic experiences, substance use, or social changes in vulnerable individuals. Some factors may be more or less important in different individuals.

The important thing to remember is that there's no single cause of psychosis, and the factors involved will be different for all people. Looking at what contributed to a person developing an episode of psychosis plays a big role in planning and supporting a person's recovery.

Everyone's experience of psychosis is different, and giving a specific label or diagnosis isn't always useful in the early stages.

Further information

For further information regarding mental health, or for information in other languages, visit:

www.orygen.org.au
www.headspace.org.au
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
www.sane.org
www.healthdirect.gov.au
www.oyh.org.au

Related factsheets

Getting help early + Young People
Recovering from psychosis + Young People
Helping someone with psychosis + Young People
Psychosis & physical health + Young People
Getting active + Young People
Sleep + Young People

Disclaimer: This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, please always seek medical advice.