

Helping someone with psychosis

+ YOUNG PEOPLE



It is often distressing to see someone experiencing psychosis. Whether it is shock, confusion, guilt, or anger, there is no right or wrong way to feel. It's easy to mistake the very early phases of psychosis for the normal ups and downs that young people go through - this is what makes it difficult to recognise the problem.

Where can young people get help?

Families, partners, friends, and other supports might find it hard to make the decision to get help for a young person with mental health issues for lots of reasons. The person experiencing an episode of psychosis mightn't wish to get help, or even acknowledge that they're unwell, which can make it extremely hard to cope alone as a support person to the person experiencing psychosis.

Getting professional help allows the nature of the problem to be clarified and identifies the type of treatment required. Professional input will also help friends and carers understand what the young person is experiencing and how to help and support them.

To make treatment and recovery easier, young people should be encouraged to seek help as early as possible. It can be very confusing to know where to get help. A good place to start is with a local doctor, community health centre or mental health service. Initially, understanding what's happening and getting the right sort of help is the biggest challenge. These services help with the next step of obtaining proper treatment. Somebody experiencing psychosis will usually need specialist treatment from a mental health clinic or a mental health professional.

What does treatment look like?

Getting help early involves recognising psychosis at the earliest possible time and finding appropriate specialist treatment. If psychosis is detected and treated early, many problems can be prevented and the effects of psychosis on the young person's life can be minimised.

The initial focus of treatment is to control symptoms - such as hallucinations, delusions, and confused thinking - and the associated symptoms, like insomnia, agitation, and poor self-care.

Treatment then gradually progresses to:

- Helping the person to make sense of their illness, and overcoming the trauma associated with it.
- Dealing with negative symptoms, such as withdrawal, loss of interest, low motivation, difficulties with thinking, and reduced emotional expression.
- Making up for disruptions in vocational, educational, and social functioning.
- Dealing with any secondary problems, such as depression or anxiety.
- Relapse prevention by decreasing risk factors and promoting protective factors.

How can I help during treatment?

Once the young person is visiting a professional or a service experienced in dealing with psychosis, it can be 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 the best person to keep in contact with is 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?

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How should I relate to the person who is unwell?

Often a person experiencing symptoms of psychosis will behave strangely, which can frighten or confuse the people around them. This is because such symptoms make it difficult for the young person to be who they usually are. Often, families, friends, and other supports ask for advice on how they should behave and talk to the person.

In providing support, it is important to remember who the young person is – whether they are a son, daughter, brother, sister, wife, husband, partner, or friend. There are no set rules for how to behave or talk. Here are some general guidelines that can be helpful when talking with or being around a person experiencing symptoms of psychosis:

- Be yourself.
- Learn about the symptoms of psychosis – this may help you understand why the person's behaving and talking differently.
- Try not to take it personally if the person says hurtful words to you when they are unwell.
- Understand that symptoms of psychosis are stressful for everyone and that you may have a range of feelings – shock, fear, sadness, anger, frustration, despair. Talking with other people, such as a healthcare professional, may help you to deal with these feelings.
- When a person is in the midst of a crisis they may need you to give them extra support and reassurance, to help them be in a safe, comforting environment, or to help them make decisions.
- When a person has acute symptoms of psychosis 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. Show sympathy. You can discuss these conversations with the young person when they are better.
- Believe the person will recover – even if it takes some time. Be patient.

Looking after yourself

Family, partners, friends, and other supports are very important in the process of recovery. When a person is recovering from an episode of psychosis, support people provide love, stability, understanding, and reassurance, as well as helping out with practical issues.

Supports may also need a period of recovery and adjustment to all that has happened. Look after yourself while you're caring for the person who's unwell. Caring for someone who is unwell can be emotionally and mentally exhausting and it's important that you get support. You can talk to the young person's treating team or your own GP to discuss different support options for yourself.

You may be able to talk with a family peer support worker – this is another person who has cared for someone

experiencing mental ill-health and is now working in a support role in the mental health service. It's often reassuring to talk to a family peer support worker because you can share your experiences. Family peer support workers are not mental health clinicians. A family peer support worker is someone who can listen and provide emotional support, as well as information and referral – they offer the opportunity for one support person to talk to another.

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Further information

To get help with supporting a person experiencing mental ill-health, visit:

www.carersaustralia.com.au
www.arafemi.org.au
www.wellways.org
www.mifa.org.au

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

Psychosis + Young People
Getting help early + Young People
Recovering from psychosis + Young People
Psychosis & physical health + Young People
Getting active + Young People
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