



Psychosis: A Guide for Families/Whānau

The best way to describe **Psychosis** (or a **Psychotic Episode**) is like **losing contact** with **reality**. Your mind plays tricks on you & you experience **unusual thoughts, perceptions** (especially seeing & hearing) & **feelings** (emotions). This might also make us **behave differently** than we do when we're not experiencing symptoms.

Psychosis is **common**, with **3 in every 100 people** experiencing it at some time in their lives.

Psychosis is an Experience that:

- Anyone can have.
- Can appear at any age but is more common in young people.
- Is found in all cultures & across history.
- Can be a single experience or can be something that comes & goes throughout life.
- Is something lots of people manage to live with or recover from & the earlier they get support the more likely they'll get on top of it sooner.

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People experiencing Psychosis usually experience some (or all) of the following:

Changes in Thinking

- Difficulty concentrating, following conversations & remembering things.
- Everyday thoughts may become confused or muddled & not join up properly. Other people may say that you are not making any sense.
- Your thinking speeding up or slowing down.
- Feeling you can't control your thoughts or that they are not your own.
- Believing your thoughts are being taken away or said aloud.

Changes in Feelings

- Mood changes are common – getting depressed, sad or irritable or extremely happy or “high”.
- Some people describe dampened down emotions (numbed out) – they feel less connected with others & don't respond as much.

Changes in Beliefs

- You may be having unusual (even weird or bizarre) beliefs that seem very real (or even quite ordinary) to you. These are called delusions. You may, or may not, be aware that other people do not believe the same things. Some common delusions are that:
 - someone/something is trying to harm you
 - you are someone else
 - you have some special gift, power or mission
 - you are receiving special messages (e.g. from TV, radio or newspapers).

Changes in Perceptions

Psychosis may **change** the way your five **senses** work so that things are sensed differently. These might be:

- **Hearing** – hearing noises or voices in a distorted way or when there is nobody there – (this can be quite common in psychosis).
- **Visual** – seeing things in a distorted way or things that aren't really there.
- **Touch** – feeling things that aren't there e.g. something crawling on your skin.
- **Smell** – smelling smells that others can't smell.
- **Taste** – food tasting different & others not noticing this.

Changes in Behaviour

Even if you are only experiencing a few of the things listed above, you may have noticed **changes** in your **behaviour** or it may be that your family & friends are more aware of it & have perhaps been complaining or talking with you about it. Changes in behaviour might include:

- **Not doing as well** as you used to (or as well as you expected to) at school or at work.
- **Behaving** in an **unusual way** when you are bothered by your thoughts or senses.
- **Not caring** for **yourself**, not showering, washing clothes or eating well.

What Causes Psychosis?

Psychosis can occur as a **single episode** (brief psychotic episode) or as a **symptom** of other **mental health problems** such as: severe depression, schizophrenia & bipolar disorder. Taking **drugs** like marijuana & amphetamines like P (& in cases some prescription medicines) can also **cause** psychotic-like **symptoms**. Some **neurological conditions** can include psychosis. While no one knows exactly what causes psychosis, a combination of **inherited** & **environmental stress factors** are thought to be **involved**.

So you think your Family Member might have Psychosis? – Now What?

If you think your family member might be experiencing psychosis it is important to get help as early as possible. Generally the **earlier** the **assessment & treatment** of psychosis, **the better** the **recovery**. If your family member seems reluctant to get help or see a health professional it may be helpful to **enlist** the support of others in the **whānau** who have a close relationship with the person you are concerned about like a sibling or grandparent.

Your **GP** can make a **referral** to the local **child & adolescent mental health team**. Some cities also have **specialty early intervention first episode psychosis services**. If your family member is experiencing psychosis following drug use, it is still important to **get help**. Services routinely support people who are experiencing mental health issues as a result of drug use. They are there to provide help, not enforce the law.

Often, the young person's psychotic thinking may prevent them seeking or agreeing to get help. Many people with psychosis have difficulty recognising, or believing that something is not quite right, even though others around them can see that things have changed for them. As family/whānau, avoid arguing or getting into a debate. Take time to **listen** and **validate** what your family/whānau member is **feeling** and **experiencing**. Offer **support, hope** and **encouragement**.

Sometimes **diagnosing** psychosis can take several **appointments** with the **psychiatrist** during the early stages because psychosis can look like a number of other issues. A **Mental Health Assessment** (see **Information Sheet on Assessment**) as well as a **medical examination** to rule out known medical causes will **help clarify** whether psychosis is what's going on for your family/whānau member.

What Treatment Options are there?

Treatment for Psychosis usually involves **medication** & other forms of **support** to help overcome Psychosis. These may include:

- Teaching **skills** to best manage symptoms.
- Learning to **manage** the **stress** that may have contributed to the experience.
- Addressing** any **substance abuse** that may have contributed to the episode.
- Working on **minimising** the chances of psychosis recurring.
- Providing support** to overcome any problems that have arisen as a result of Psychosis (e.g. problems at school or with friends & family/whānau, feeling anxious or depressed).

When you are supporting someone in your family/whānau with psychosis it is important to access support, information & education for yourself. Make sure you carry on with your own activities & take time to relax as well.

Helpful Websites:

www.supportingfamilies.org.nz

www.headspace.org.nz

www.hearingvoices.org.nz

www.engagenz.co.nz

www.intervoiceonline.org