

Psychotic illness



On average, three in every 100¹ people will experience a psychotic episode at some point in their lifetime. If you are concerned about a friend or family member who is showing signs of psychosis, it is important to seek help early on.

What is psychosis?

Psychosis refers to a period of detachment from reality or the experience of bizarre phenomena such as hallucinations, delusions or disorganised thoughts. Psychosis may occur following a particular event, in the case of postpartum psychosis, or be part of a mental disorder, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Psychosis may also be drug induced, occurring while under the influence of a particular drug or following the use of substances such as cannabis and amphetamines. Psychosis often develops in adolescence/early adulthood, and early intervention at this stage is important to later outcomes. Many individuals withdraw from others, however, making it difficult to determine what is going on.

With the right support and treatment, most people who are diagnosed with a psychotic illness will recover and be able to lead a normal life.

Signs of psychosis

A person experiencing a psychotic episode might experience the following:

- **Disordered thinking** – the person might be confused as their thoughts do not make sense. Their speech may be unusual, and their conversation might be difficult to follow. The person may find it difficult to concentrate, remember things or make plans
- **Delusions** – the person might hold beliefs that are clearly untrue or not based on fact. Persecutory delusions are the most common type of delusions a person may have when experiencing psychosis. In this case, the person believes that they will be harmed by another individual or group of people

- **Hallucinations** – auditory hallucinations are the most common type of hallucinations in schizophrenia and related disorders. The person experiencing hallucinations ‘hears’ voices distinct from their own thoughts which no one else can hear. Hallucinations can cause people to become agitated and distressed
- **Changes in behaviour** – a person experiencing a psychotic episode might also behave in an unusual way. They may become angry or upset without any apparent cause, or they may be unusually excited or depressed. It is also not uncommon for a person with a psychotic illness to begin to lack attention towards their self-care. They may also be unable to communicate how they are feeling and might react to things in an unusual manner

How to help someone who is showing signs of psychosis

If you are concerned about a friend or family member who is showing signs of psychosis, it is important to seek help early on. There are different levels of support available based on how the person is presenting.

- If the individual is at risk of harm to themselves or others, call 000 immediately to notify emergency services. This is required when a person puts themselves in a dangerous situation or poses a threat to others.
- If you have serious concerns about a friend or family member who is exhibiting signs of psychosis you can offer to take them to the emergency department of your local hospital for assessment and treatment. However, if the person refuses this support or it is unsafe for you to do so, contact the local Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CATT) at the closest major public hospital. The CATT team are trained to provide support to people experiencing a mental health crisis and can come to the person’s home to make that assessment

¹ Pirälä, J. (2007)

- If you are supporting a friend or family member with a long-standing mental illness and you see a deterioration in their mental health, contact their GP or treating health professional to discuss your concerns and gain advice on how to best support them. However, be mindful of that person's right to privacy, and that health professionals may not be able to divulge specific information about the individual. Seeking help as early as possible will reduce the likelihood of a major psychotic episode from occurring

How to best support someone with a psychotic illness

It is important to remember to respect people's autonomy and their right to privacy and confidentiality. While it might be difficult to watch people you love suffering, you cannot force them to seek treatment. People experiencing a psychotic episode or illness may benefit from the following:

- Time and support to process what is happening to them. Initially, they may not have insight into their illness or understand how it affects them. Try to be patient and non-judgemental while they learn more about their condition.
- Help the person to understand that their illness is only part of them. It does not define who they are.
- Demonstrate compassion by acknowledging the difficult situation they are in and the steps they need to take for recovery.
- If the person is happy for you to know, find out what medication and treatment they require and encourage the person to continue to engage with their treating health professionals.
- Let the person know how much you care about them and that you are there to support them.
- Instil a sense of hope for their recovery and future wellbeing.
- Encourage the person to become independent as they recover from the period of psychosis. This may mean you take a step back in your level of support.
- When they are feeling well, suggest to the person that you work on a document called an 'Advanced Care Directive' which outlines the signs or symptoms that the person is becoming unwell, and who needs to be contacted. It may also include details on practical issues such as who takes care of pets.

- Ensure you have support yourself if you need to provide a long-term role in assisting the person to manage their mental illness.

Where to go to for support?

There are various support options available if you require advice on how to help a friend or family member with a psychotic illness. Remember, you are not alone and contacting services for help and support is a positive step.

Below are some of the places to go for information and support:

- Phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 (available 24/7) or chat to a Crisis Supporter online at lifeline.org.au (7pm – midnight every night)
- **SANE Australia** – 1800 18 7263
- **Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia** – 1800 985 944
- **Mental Health in Multicultural Australia** – (02) 6285 3100

For local services and centres in your area, visit the Lifeline Service Finder Directory at www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/service-finder

It can be difficult to come to terms with a friend or family member's diagnosis of mental illness. It is important to talk through your experience with someone you can trust and to acknowledge your emotional reactions. Doing so will put you in the best position to support the person involved.



For 24-hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14. For more information visit www.lifeline.org.au

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13 11 14

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 Lifeline