



## Psychosis

**Psychosis** is a serious but treatable medical condition that reflects a disturbance in brain functioning. A person with psychosis experiences some loss of contact with reality, characterized by changes in their way of thinking, believing, perceiving and/or behaving. For the person experiencing psychosis, the condition can be very disorienting and distressing. Without effective treatment, psychosis can overwhelm the lives of individuals and families.

*Psychosis is a medical condition that affects the brain. It can be treated.*

### A person with psychosis may:

- experience confused thoughts
- feel their thoughts have sped up or slowed down
- feel preoccupied with unusual ideas
- believe that others can manipulate their thoughts; or that they can manipulate the thoughts of others
- perceive voices or visions that no one else can hear or see
- feel 'changed' in some way
- act differently than they usually would

Sometimes psychosis emerges gradually over time, so that in the early stages symptoms might be dismissed or ignored. Other times, symptoms appear suddenly and are very obvious to the individual and those around them. Symptoms vary from person to person and can change over time. The initial experience of psychotic symptoms is known as the 'first episode' of psychosis. *It is important to pay attention to possible symptoms and seek help early.*

### What's it like to have psychosis?

*"It was like I was having a million thoughts all at once and yet I was so disorganized, nothing was getting done. I was frightened and anxious because I felt someone was trying to harm me. Increasingly, I spent most of my time alone in my room doing nothing. I didn't want to be bothered with friends or family. The television started having special messages meant only for me and I was hearing voices commenting on what I was doing. Looking back, I realize things just weren't making sense anymore. At the time though, it seemed normal and I didn't mention what was happening with me to anyone. Since getting treatment, I understand that I was experiencing a health problem called psychosis."*

### Who's most likely to experience psychosis?

Psychosis can happen to anyone. Symptoms of psychosis most often begin between 16 and 30 years of age. Both males and females can be affected. Males tend to experience symptoms a few years earlier than females. Persons with a family history of serious mental illness are at increased risk of developing psychosis.

### What causes psychosis?

When psychosis occurs for the first time it is difficult to know the cause. Psychosis is associated with a number of medical conditions including schizophrenia, depression, bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder and substance abuse, among others. Because the first episode of psychosis can signal a variety of conditions, it is important to seek a thorough medical assessment.

### How is psychosis treated?

Low doses of anti-psychotic medications are a key component of treatment, along with education and support for the individual and their family. Treatment strategies are aimed at allowing the individual to maintain their daily routines as much as possible. There have been tremendous

advances in the treatment of psychosis during recent years, reducing the need for hospital stays and promoting faster, fuller recovery.

**Typically, psychosis does not disappear on its own. Instead, if left untreated, the condition can worsen and severely disrupt the lives of individuals and families.**

**What should you do?**

If you, or someone close to you, is experiencing symptoms of psychosis:

**Don't wait. Look for help.** Many persons with psychosis wait a long time before seeking treatment. But recovery is more difficult when effective treatment is delayed.

**Talk to your family doctor.** They can refer you to a specialist for a full assessment. At present, early psychosis intervention is the focus of much interest in the mental health community. Many medical and mental health professionals are themselves learning about the best approaches to treatment. Some cities in Canada already have centres designed specifically for the treatment of early psychosis.

**Ask questions.** Be persistent. It is important to consult with a medical professional who is familiar with early psychosis.

**Educate yourself. Get the facts.** There is a great deal of information available about early psychosis and recent developments in treatment. An excellent starting point is the web site developed by the Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre (EPPIC) in Melbourne, Australia: <http://www.eppic.org.au/about/>. Most public libraries provide free access to the internet.

**Psychosis...**

- is a common medical condition affecting 3% of the population
- results from a disruption in brain functioning
- can radically alter a person's thoughts, beliefs, perceptions and behaviour
- affects males and females equally
- tends to emerge during adolescence and young adulthood
- is more likely to occur in families with a history of serious mental illness
- can be effectively treated

**If you suspect psychosis, don't ignore it.**

*Treatment is most effective when it is started early. With proper treatment, most people recover fully from the first episode of psychosis. For many, the first episode is also the last.*

**Psychosis can happen to anyone. Early detection and effective treatment can promote full recovery.**