

Psychosis Information Leaflet

Psychosis is not a single entity, rather it is an umbrella term describing a group of loosely related abnormalities of thinking, perceiving, communicating and behaving. These experiences are very common in society and at any one time it is estimated that 8% of the population have had psychotic experiences. Only a small percentage of these people develop a psychotic disorder requiring treatment. In general, a person can only be said to be suffering from a psychotic disorder if these experiences are prominent, persistent or are causing the person distress and difficulties in every day functioning.

A recent study found that 3.5% of the population experience a psychotic disorder at some time in their lives. Psychosis commonly emerges early on in life, often in the late teens or twenties. People suffering with psychosis can experience a loss of touch with reality, and develop symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions.

Hallucinations occur when someone experiences a sensation without any stimulus. Hallucinations can be normal occurrences, for example when drifting off to sleep or waking up. People with hearing difficulties can experience auditory hallucinations, and similarly people with visual difficulties may experience visual hallucinations, without this being indicative of any mental illness. Use of drugs such as LSD, and extreme lack of sleep may also induce experiences like hallucinations.

Hallucinations may also be indicative of mental illness and in this instance they tend to be more complex, intense and persistent. Hallucinations can occur in any of the 5 sensations; auditory (hearing), visual (seeing); gustatory (tasting), haptic (touching) and olfactory (smelling). Hallucinations can be very simple i.e. noises or flashes of light, or can be more complex i.e. hearing voices or seeing fully formed objects. Auditory hallucinations are the most commonly described in mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, and usually consist of hearing noises or voices when there is nothing to be heard.

Delusions are another common symptom of psychosis, and consist of false beliefs held with complete conviction. An example would be holding a belief that people are against you or wish to harm you. False beliefs may not appear understandable to others, however may be understandable in terms of what the patient is experiencing. For example people with psychosis may interpret events in their environment incorrectly such as believing that someone who is looking at them in a normal manner, may be looking at them in a threatening manner.

In addition people with psychosis can experience a loss of motivation to function in daily living. Poor energy and loss of enjoyment may also occur. These type of symptoms of are often referred to as negative symptoms .

Symptoms	Description
Hallucinations	Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting or feeling things without there being anything there
Delusions	Fixed false beliefs not consistent with cultural beliefs
Thought Disorder	Disorganised thinking
Blunted Affect	Loss of Emotional Expression
Avolition/Anhedonia	Loss of Energy/Drive/Enjoyment
Depressed Mood	Subjective sadness, hopelessness
Cognitive Deficits	Sometimes present as subtle difficulties such as decreased attention or concentration

The content of psychotic experiences may be affected by culture. For example the content of paranoid delusions may relate to issues of the day; in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s paranoid delusions regarding the IRA were common, but with the end of the “troubles” these ideas have become much less common. Knowledge of an individual’s social and cultural background is essential before a diagnosis of psychosis can be made.

The term “psychotic” is frequently misapplied to people or behaviours without any understanding of what this term means. The term psychotic does not imply that a person is dangerous or liable to behave bizarrely. Somebody who is “psychotic” is suffering from psychosis. Most people who have had psychosis at one time in their lives are very well at present and without any ongoing problems. Often they will have experienced hallucinations, delusions or thought disorder at one or more times in their lives, but now may be fully recovered or just have mild symptoms.

There are a great many conditions in which psychosis can feature, sometimes alongside other difficulties such as depressed mood, anxiety or memory difficulties. Conditions in which psychosis features include schizophrenia, depression, dementia, brain injuries, alcohol misuse, drug misuse and many other conditions. Although it may appear from diagnostic classification systems that these conditions are distinct there can often be some overlap between these conditions.

Conditions featuring psychosis

Diagnosis	Common Symptoms
Schizophrenia	Delusions, Hallucinations, Loss of motivation
Bipolar Affective Disorder	Elated mood, Delusions, Hallucinations,
Severe Depression	Depressed mood, Delusions, Hallucinations
Alcohol/Drug Induced Psychosis	Alcohol/Drug misuse, Delusions, Hallucinations
Delusional Disorder	Delusions, often long-term
Organic Psychosis	Delusions, Hallucinations caused by a biological illness/brain injury
Brief Psychotic Disorder	Delusions/Hallucinations of short duration

(See other pages on the website for illnesses in the above table)

The actual cause of psychosis is complex, and it is often difficult to find a single underlying cause. For most of the psychotic disorders, it is thought to be a combination of a genetic predisposition, abnormalities in the development of the growing brain, and environmental stresses.

Treatments for Psychosis

Treatment for psychosis involves providing a comprehensive treatment package suited to the needs of each individual. Successful recovery from an episode of psychosis usually involves treatment, at least for a period of 1-2 years, with antipsychotic medications. However, it is important to emphasise that medication only ever plays a part in the recovery process and that other psychological treatments, rehabilitative interventions, lifestyle, family support, environmental and other changes are also of critical importance. In addition to antipsychotic medications there are other medications and supplements that can sometimes be helpful in the treatment of psychosis.

There are numerous medications which can be used for psychosis, each of which may have different benefits and potential side effects. There is no single antipsychotic medication which is most effective for everyone, and the choice of medication is usually made following discussions between the patient and prescribing doctor.

Cognitive behavioural therapy is a helpful talking therapy which is used for recognising symptoms of psychosis, identifying relapse triggers, and learning to cope with symptoms of psychosis. Family education can also be hugely beneficial in assisting recovery from psychotic illnesses, and occupational therapy often plays a crucial role in rehabilitation.

Similar to many other medical illnesses, early detection and treatment of psychosis leads to better outcomes. Early intervention strategies are gaining recognition as a crucial aspect of the management approach to psychosis. Efforts at educating the public, and others likely to come into contact with people developing psychosis, such as General Practitioners, teachers, counsellors, and gardai, has been shown to improve the long term outcome of psychotic illnesses, by leading to earlier identification and treatment of these illnesses. The reason for this better outcome isn't fully clear, but it is believed to occur by reducing the toxicity caused to people suffering with psychosis. For example it is possible that psychotic symptoms may cause biological damage to the brain, or that the experience

of psychotic symptoms may damage thought processes in the brain. It is also thought that the social consequences of symptoms early on in psychotic illnesses, such as loss of a job, or damage to relationships may have a detrimental effect on long term outcome.

Further information on psychosis and some of the psychotic disorders may be found at:

<http://www.detect.ie>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/mentalhealthandgrowingup/psychoticillnessyoungpeople.aspx>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfoforall/problems/schizophrenia.aspx>

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