



understanding psychosis

Psychosis is an experience where a person has problems interpreting the real world. They might see or hear things that other people can't, or have unusual ideas or beliefs.



Psychosis is often frightening for the person going through it and misunderstood by those around them. But it can be treated. Most people who experience psychosis make a good recovery and go on to lead healthy, productive lives.

Psychosis is a serious issue that calls for professional clinical help – it can have a big impact on a person's life and should never be ignored. It's important to get help early to increase chances for a quicker, more complete recovery.

What are the symptoms of psychosis?

Confused thinking: Everyday thoughts can become confused, making it hard to understand or express ideas. A person might find it hard to concentrate, follow a conversation or remember things. Thoughts can seem to speed up or slow down.

False beliefs (delusions): A person can have strong beliefs in things that aren't real to other people. They might believe that they're being followed, that someone is trying to harm them, or that they're getting secret messages from TV. This can be very scary for the person and impact their behaviour.

Hallucinations: A person may hear or see something that isn't actually there. Sometimes other senses like touch, smell or taste can also be affected. For example, they might:

- hear noises or voices that aren't there
- see things that seem strange, like faces in objects or shadows at the window
- have a strange taste in their mouth
- smell things others can't
- feel things on their skin that are not there.

Changed emotions: A person may feel strange and cut off from the world. They may seem to feel less emotion or show less emotion to those around them.

Changed behaviour: A person may be extremely active or find it hard getting the energy to do things. They might laugh when things don't seem funny or become angry or upset without any obvious reason. The person may stop doing the things they used to do like hanging out with friends and family. The person can seem excited, depressed or irritable for little or no reason obvious to others.

Symptoms of psychosis are different for everyone. They might not be present all the time, have different causes and can change over time.

What are the types of psychosis?

Experiencing psychotic symptoms doesn't necessarily mean that someone has a psychotic illness.

- About three in every 100 people are diagnosed with a psychotic illness at some stage in their life.
- More than three quarters of psychotic experiences don't progress to a diagnosable illness.
- A person is most likely to have their first episode of psychosis in their late teens or early twenties.

Many people assume that people experiencing psychosis have schizophrenia, but there are lots of illnesses that have psychotic symptoms, including:

- brief psychotic disorder
- substance/medication-induced psychotic disorder
- bipolar disorder
- major depression with psychotic features
- delusional disorder
- schizophrenia.

Because people's symptoms often change over time, the type of disorder often changes, too. Sometimes people are diagnosed with one thing, and then later the diagnosis is changed or removed if they don't fit the criteria for that disorder anymore.

What causes psychosis?

Like lots of mental health difficulties, psychosis is caused by a combination of different things. Things like genetics (inherited from parents) and a history of tough times (like trauma and childhood experiences) can make a person more vulnerable to psychosis.

Things people are exposed to in life (or 'stressors') can also contribute to developing a psychosis. They include:

- drug use
- grief and loss
- difficult times with family or friends
- problems at school or work.

Recovering from psychosis

The recovery journey is different for everyone. Just like with any illness, recovering from psychosis can be an ongoing process. It's not just about getting rid of the symptoms – it's about learning to enjoy life while managing the tough times when they happen.

How is psychosis treated?

Treatments for psychosis usually include:

- counselling
- medication
- education about psychosis
- support from family, community and/or mob
- practical support to get back to school or work.

When recovering from psychosis, it's really important to take care of yourself. Avoiding drugs and learning better ways to cope with stress can help stop the symptoms from coming back in the future.

How do I help someone experiencing psychosis?

It can be frightening to experience psychosis. Try to be calm. Help the person feel safe and access the right support.

- Ask them what's happening for them. They may say things that sound strange. Listen carefully – don't feel you need to try to 'talk them out of' these ideas.
- Remember the person may be responding to experiences that you're not aware of.
- Connect with the emotion the person is experiencing, as opposed to the idea, if you can. Asking how they feel about the experience they're having can help if you're not sure what to say.
- Encourage the young person to get professional treatment as early as possible. Offer to go with them or help them connect with services.
- Look after yourself, get some support if you need and practise good self-care.



If someone is suggesting they will harm themselves or you're concerned they might not be safe, call your local mental health service or 000 urgently to arrange specialist attention. Acute mental health teams are specially trained to assist people experiencing psychosis in crisis.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)



If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

The headspace Clinical Reference Group have approved this clinical resource. Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, headspace makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information. Version 1.0, 13 April 2019