

# PSYCHOSIS

The word psychosis is used to describe conditions that affect the mind, where there has been some loss of contact with reality. When someone becomes ill in this way it is called a psychotic episode. Psychosis is most likely to occur in young adults and is quite common. Most make a full recovery from the experience. Psychosis can happen to anyone. Like any other illness it can be treated.

## **Causes**

A number of theories have been suggested as to what causes psychosis, but there is still much research to be done. There is some indication that psychosis is caused by a poorly understood combination of biological factors that create a vulnerability to experiencing psychotic symptoms during adolescence or early adult life. These symptoms often emerge in response to stress, drug abuse or social changes in such vulnerable individuals. Some factors may be more or less important in one person than in another. In first episode psychosis, the cause is particularly unclear. It is, therefore, necessary for the person to have a thorough examination to rule out known medical causes and make the diagnosis as clear as possible. This usually involves medical tests, as well as a detailed interview with a mental health specialist. Psychosis has many forms. Course and outcome varies from person to person.

## **Symptoms**

Psychosis can lead to changes in mood and thinking and to abnormal ideas, making it hard to understand how the person feels. In order to try to understand the experience of psychosis it is useful to group together some of the more characteristic symptoms.

*Confused Thinking:* Everyday thoughts become confused or don't join up properly. Sentences are unclear or don't make sense. A person may have difficulty concentrating, following a conversation or remembering things. Thoughts seem to speed up or slow down.

*False Belief:* It is common for a person experiencing a psychotic episode to hold false beliefs, known as delusions. The person is so convinced of their delusion that the most logical argument cannot make them change their mind. For example, someone may be convinced from the way cars are parked outside their house that they are being watched by the police.

*Hallucinations:* In psychosis, the person sees, hears, feels, smells or tastes something that is not actually there. For example, they may hear voices that no one else can hear, or see things that aren't there. Things may taste or smell as if they are bad or even poisoned.

*Changed Feelings:* How someone feels may change for no apparent reason. They may feel strange and cut off from the world with everything moving in slow motion. Mood swings are common and they may feel unusually excited or depressed. People's emotions seem dampened, they feel less than they used to, or show less emotion to those around them.

*Changed Behaviour:* People with psychosis behave differently from the way they usually do. They may be extremely active or lethargic, sitting around all day. They may laugh inappropriately or become angry or upset without apparent cause. Often, changes in behaviour are associated with the symptoms already described above. For example, a person believing they are in danger may call the police. Someone who believes he is Jesus Christ may spend the day preaching in the streets. People may stop eating because they are concerned that the food is poisoned, or have trouble sleeping because they are scared of something. Symptoms vary from person to person and may change over time.

## Seeking help

Effective treatments are readily available for psychotic illnesses. The earlier treatment is started, the quicker and better the recovery. With appropriate treatment the majority of people who experience a psychotic illness will recover. However, for some people, psychosis can become an episodic problem through their lives. A person experiencing a psychotic illness will require specialist assistance. Treatment for psychosis involves the use of *antipsychotic medication*, individual counselling (talking therapy), family support and counselling (psychosocial treatment), practical support, and involvement in a recovery program which focuses on helping people get back on track (rehabilitation). Treatment focuses on the following:

- controlling symptoms
- assisting the person to make sense of and overcome the trauma of their illness
- preventing relapse through decreasing risk factors such as stress, substance abuse, family conflict and stigma
- promoting protective factors such as secure accommodation and income, engagement in work or study; strong social networks and family supports and adherence to medication.

**Useful contacts:** [www.shineonline.ie](http://www.shineonline.ie) , [www.detect.ie](http://www.detect.ie) , [www.mentalhealthireland.ie](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie)