



Understanding psychosis

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SAMH
Scottish Action for Mental Health



This booklet explains what psychosis is, including possible causes and how you can access treatment and support. It includes tips for helping yourself, and guidance for friends and family.

Since 1923, SAMH has represented the voice of people affected by mental health problems in Scotland. We are here to provide help, information and support.

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WHAT IS PSYCHOSIS?

Psychosis (also called a psychotic experience or psychotic episode) is when you perceive or interpret reality in a very different way from people around you. You might be said to 'lose touch' with reality.

The most common types of psychosis are hallucinations and delusions. You might also experience disorganised thinking and speech. Psychosis affects people in different ways. You might experience it once, have short episodes throughout your life, or live with it most of the time.

You may have a positive experience of psychosis. For example if you see the faces of loved ones or hear their voices you may find this comforting. Some people say it helps them understand the world or makes them more creative.

But you may find that psychosis affects your behaviour or disrupts your life, making you feel tired and overwhelmed. Hallucinations or delusions could make you feel anxious, scared, threatened or confused. If you have delusions about certain people or organisations, you may find it hard to trust them.

"The sense of shame and guilt I felt because I was incapable of functioning day-to-day as an adult left me isolated from others and aggressive to those who cared and wanted to help."



Is psychosis a diagnosis or a symptom?

The word psychosis is usually used to refer to an experience. It's a symptom of some mental health problems and not a diagnosis itself. Doctors and psychiatrists may say someone is experiencing psychosis rather than giving them one of these diagnoses. Some people prefer this.

Psychosis and stigma

There are a lot of misunderstandings about what it means to experience psychosis. Lots of people wrongly think that the word 'psychotic' means 'dangerous'. The media often shows people with psychosis behaving like this even though very few people who experience psychosis ever hurt anyone else.

It's important to remember that you aren't alone and you don't have to put up with people treating you badly.

Here are some options for you to think about:

- Show people this information to help them understand more about psychosis
- Talk to other people who experience psychosis by going to a support group – or setting one up for yourself
- Get involved in awareness raising about psychosis
- Share your experience with others. Contact: communications@samh.org.uk
- Know your rights. Our online pages on **legal rights** provide more information.



“It’s an illness that can be treated just like any other. I don’t choose or want to be psychotic any more than people choose or want any other types of ill health.”



WHAT TYPES OF PSYCHOSIS ARE THERE?

Hallucinations

Hallucinations could include:

- **seeing things** that other people don't (for example people's faces, animals or religious figures)
- **seeing objects** that seem to be distorted or move in ways that they usually wouldn't
- **experiencing tastes, smells and sensations** that have no apparent cause (for example feeling insects crawling on your skin)
- **hearing voices** that other people don't (these could be positive and helpful or hostile and nasty).

Delusions

Lots of people have beliefs that many other people don't share. But a delusion is usually a false belief that no-one else shares. You will still believe it even if logically it doesn't make sense, or if experiences show that it can't be true.

For example, you might think you are a very important person – you may believe that you are rich and powerful or that you can control the stock markets or the weather. These kind of beliefs are sometimes called delusions of grandeur.

Some delusions can be very frightening and can make you feel threatened. For example you might feel that something or someone is trying to control, harm or kill you (when you have no reason to believe this). These ideas are sometimes called paranoid delusions.

“I felt as though I was in wonderland. None of my family or friends understood why... I had a calling from a voice in sky. I was lost and lonely.”

Disorganised thinking and speech

Hallucinations and delusions can make your thoughts and emotions feel confused and disorganised. But disorganised thinking (sometimes called 'formal thought disorder') can also be a type of psychosis.

Racing thoughts is where thoughts go through your head very fast. If you have racing thoughts you usually have flight of ideas too.

Flight of ideas is where your thoughts move very quickly from idea to idea, making links that other people don't.

"Racing ideas flooded my mind. It seemed as though my mind was disintegrating, my inner life – my unconscious mind – started flooding my consciousness without a break."

If you have disorganised thinking you might:

- speak very quickly and stumble over your words. Other people may find it difficult to understand what you're saying
- link words together because of the way they sound rather than what they mean. This can mean your speech sounds jumbled and doesn't make sense to other people. This is sometimes called word salad
- change the topic of conversation very quickly as your thoughts move from one thing to another
- find it difficult to keep your attention on one thing.

You may also have racing thoughts and flight of ideas if you experience mania or hypomania. If you only have them during a depressive, manic or mixed episode then you may be diagnosed with bipolar disorder. See SAMH's booklet 'Understanding bipolar disorder' for more information.

WHY DO I EXPERIENCE PSYCHOSIS?

Psychosis can be a symptom of lots of different mental health problems.

If you have one or more of these diagnoses then you may experience psychosis – and if you experience psychosis (and you have other symptoms too) then you may be given one of these diagnoses:

- severe depression
- schizophrenia or schizophreniform disorder
- bipolar disorder
- schizoaffective disorder
- paranoid personality disorder or schizotypal personality disorder
- post partum psychosis
- delusional or paranoid disorder
- brief psychotic disorder (you may be given this diagnosis if you experience psychosis for a less than a month and your doctor doesn't think that another diagnosis describes your symptoms better).

But you might also experience psychosis on its own. Some ideas about things that make psychosis more likely include:

- **Physical illness or injury** – you may see or hear things if you have a high fever, head injury, or lead or mercury poisoning. If you have Alzheimer's disease or Parkinson's disease you may also experience hallucinations or delusions
- **Drugs** – you may hear or see things as a result of taking street drugs like cannabis and LSD, as a side effect of some prescribed drugs or if you are coming off psychiatric drugs
- **Lack of sleep** – you may experience hallucinations if you have a severe lack of sleep
- **Hunger** – you may experience hallucinations if you are very hungry, have low blood sugar or if you are not getting enough food

- **Bereavement** – if you have recently lost someone, you may hear them talking to you. You may also feel that they are with you even though you can't see them
- **Abuse or trauma** – if you have experienced abuse or a very traumatic event, you are more likely to experience psychosis
- **Spiritual experiences** – some people experience voices or visions as part of a spiritual experience. This may be a positive experience for you – it may make you feel special or help you make sense of your life. It could be a negative experience – for example you may feel that you're possessed by an evil spirit or that you are an important religious person
- **Family inheritance** – you are more likely to experience psychosis if a blood relative has also experienced it.



HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF?

These suggestions could help you cope with psychosis. You may choose to try them on their own or alongside treatment.

Peer support

Peer support brings together people who've had similar experiences to support each other. You could access peer support online or try a support group in your local area.

You can find peer support groups for psychosis through:

- The Hearing Voices Network
- The National Paranoia Network
- Bipolar Scotland.

(See 'Useful contacts' on p.17)

"I think a routine of structure, quiet and an unpressurised environment, combined with medication, was ultimately the key to my recovery."

Recognise your triggers

It might be helpful to keep a diary recording, for example:

- life events
- your mood
- your diet
- sleep.

You could do this in a notebook or use an app or online tool. This can help you:

- understand what triggers your psychosis or makes it worse
- think about what has been helpful in the past
- recognise warning signs that tell you when you are becoming unwell.

Once you have a better understanding of your triggers, you can try to take steps to avoid them. If you learn to recognise your warning signs, you can take action early to try and prevent your psychosis getting worse. Family and friends may also be able to help you spot when you are becoming unwell.

Learn to relax

- Manage your stress
- Try some relaxation techniques. Relaxation can help you look after your wellbeing when you are feeling stressed, anxious or busy.

Look after yourself

- Try to get enough sleep. Sleep can give you the energy to cope with difficult feelings and experiences
- Think about your diet. Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels
- Try and take some exercise. Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing
- Doing practical things like gardening, cooking or making things can help you feel more connected to the world around you. Being outside in green space can help you feel more in touch with your surroundings.

Create a crisis plan

During a crisis you may not be able to tell people what helps you. When you are feeling well it can be a good idea to talk to someone you trust about what you would like to happen (or not to happen) when you are in crisis. It might help to create a crisis plan.

“I painted regularly – something I hadn’t done for years but felt inspired to do.”



WHAT TREATMENT AND SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

For many people, there is no quick and simple treatment for psychosis. However, with the right treatment and support, it is possible to manage the symptoms of psychosis and recover.

This does not always mean that the symptoms of psychosis will go away entirely. You may find that you still experience psychosis during and after treatment. But that treatment helps you learn ways of coping so your experiences are less distressing and don't interfere with your life as much.

How do doctors decide my treatment?

Before you start any treatment, your mental health professionals should discuss all your options with you and listen to what you want. They should look at all aspects of your life including your environment and any possible physical causes of your psychosis.

Your treatment may depend on whether you are diagnosed with a specific mental health problem. An advocate can help you get the treatment you need.

What treatment is available?

Talking treatments can help you understand your experiences and develop coping strategies to deal with them. You may be offered CBTp. This is a form of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for people experiencing psychosis.

- **Medication.** Most people with psychosis will be offered anti-psychotic drugs. You may be offered other drugs (for example antidepressants or mood stabilisers) if you experience other symptoms as well. You may also be offered drugs to help reduce side effects caused by the antipsychotics
- **Family therapy.** You may be offered family therapy (sometimes called family intervention or systemic therapy). Family therapy can help you understand any difficulties you are going through as a family

“My antipsychotic medication saved my life. It took many tries to get the right medication for me.”

- **Arts therapies** can help you express how you are feeling in different ways. They can be helpful if you are having difficulty talking about your experience.

What other support can I get?

Early intervention (EI) teams.

EI teams work with you during your first experience of psychosis. They usually include people who can help you in different ways. For example:

- psychiatrists
- psychologists
- community mental health nurses
- social workers
- support workers.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that early intervention services should be open to people of all ages. But some places only offer services to people under a certain age – usually under 35.

Community care

If you experience psychosis a lot or it lasts a long time, you may be referred to community care services to help you cope. The phrase ‘community care’ is used to describe the various services available to help you manage your physical and mental health problems in the community.

This might include:

- your community mental health team (CMHT)
- nursing or social work support
- home help
- day centres
- supported accommodation.

Community care can also include crisis services and early intervention teams. If you become very distressed during an episode of psychosis you may need to be cared for in hospital.

HOW CAN OTHER PEOPLE HELP?

This section is for people who want to support someone who experiences psychosis.

It can be really hard to see someone you care about experiencing psychosis. But you can help. Here are some suggestions for ways you can support them while also looking after your own wellbeing.

- **Listen and try to understand.** It can help if your loved one feels able to discuss their feelings and options with someone supportive and calm. Listen to their experiences and ask them what would help. Our information can help you understand more about psychosis
- **Focus on feelings rather than experiences.** It's hard to know how to respond when someone sees, hears or believes something that you don't. Instead of confirming or denying their experience it can help to say something like "I understand that you see things that way, but it's not like that for me". It's usually more helpful to focus on how the person is feeling about what they are experiencing

- **Offer practical help.** Ask them if they would like any practical help. For example they may like your help to access a particular service or ask you to act as a supporter for them
- **Respect their wishes.** Even if you feel that you know what's best, it's important to respect their wishes and don't try and take over or make decisions without them. People tend to do less well if family and friends are very critical or over protective

"You can help by lending an ear to talk to, especially between visits from mental health professionals."

- **Family therapy** can help the whole family understand what the person with psychosis is going through and identify what is helpful and unhelpful for them and for you. You might want to ask your GP if this is available in your area
- **Plan for a crisis.** When your loved one is feeling well you may want to discuss how you can help in a crisis. This could include planning practical things like treatment and hospital visits. You might also find it helpful to state clearly what you feel you can and can't deal with during a crisis
- **Get support for yourself.** Seeing someone you care about experiencing psychosis can be distressing or even frightening. Our information on how to cope as a carer and how to improve your mental wellbeing can help you look after yourself too.

Help in an emergency

If you are worried that your family member or friend is becoming very unwell or experiencing a mental health crisis you could suggest that they use their crisis plan (if they have one).

“The extremes of behaviour and emotions played havoc with my relationships and daily functioning to the point where the simplest of tasks overwhelmed me.”



USEFUL CONTACTS

Bipolar Scotland

T: 0141 560 2050

W: bipolarscotland.org.uk

Information, support and advice for people affected by bipolar disorder and those who care for them.

Breathing Space

T: 0800 83 8587

W: breathingspace.scot

Confidential out of office hours telephone line for people experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression.

Give Us A Shout

T: 85258 (text only)

W: giveusashout.org

24/7 crisis text line.

Hearing Voices Network

W: hearing-voices.org

Information and support for people who hear voices and local support groups.

Intervoice

W: intervoiceonline.org

International community for people who hear voices.

Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

T: 0800 389 6809 (service users & carers phone line)

W: mwscot.org.uk

They protect and promote the human rights of people with mental health problems and related conditions.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

T: 0845 003 7780

W: nice.org.uk

Offers guidance on treatments for psychosis.

National Paranoia Network

T: 0114 271 8210

W: nationalparanoianetwork.org

Information and support for people who experience paranoid thoughts.

NHS Inform

W: nhsinform.scot

Information on medical conditions.

See Me

W: seemescotland.org

*National programme to tackle
mental health stigma and
discrimination.*

Support in Mind

T: 0131 662 4359

W: supportinmindscotland.org.uk

*Action for people affected by mental
illness.*





“I think a routine of structure, quiet and an unpressurised environment, combined with medication, was ultimately the key to my recovery.”



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SAMHmentalhealth



@samhscotland

To read or print SAMH's information booklets visit samh.org.uk. If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email communications@samh.org.uk

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Scottish Charity No SC008897. Registered office:
Brunswick House, 51 Wilson Street, Glasgow G1 1UZ
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