



# What is psychosis?

## What is a mental illness?

By mental illness we mean things like depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, anorexia, obsessive compulsive disorder and lots of others.

People often look for help for related problems, like stress, anger, tension, sleep problems, low self-worth, family or relationship problems, alcohol and drug problems, self-harm or physical health problems. There's nothing weird about mental illness.

The label isn't really that important. What matters is getting advice, finding ways to get on with life and overcoming difficulties. Research evidence shows that the earlier you get support, the easier it is to get back to things that are important to you. The more involved you are in deciding what's best for you, the better the outcome.

## What is psychosis?

Psychosis is not a diagnosis; it's more a name for a set of experiences. It's most likely to start when you're a teenager or a young adult, but it can start when you're older too. It might be helpful to be know what psychosis is and what it isn't.

The symptoms include things like:

- paranoia, thinking someone's laughing at you, talking about you, following you or out to get you, thinking that things on the TV, radio or in newspapers relate to you, thinking you or someone else are someone they're not or having other strange or upsetting thoughts
- having experiences of hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, or tasting things that other people don't.
- having confused thinking or speech that can get jumbled up, so that what you say is hard for other people to understand. You may go off the topic or include words that are out of place.

It can be scary at the time, but you can recover, have a life, a good job, a relationship and a family. Even psychosis is quite common. Psychosis may just be an extension of anxieties that we all have. It can happen when people are traumatised or extremely stressed by something that has happened to them.



*“I was hearing voices. I thought there was someone trying to get me out of the house. I thought I heard my neighbours walking past and I thought they were talking about me. Then they went around the corner and I could still hear them. I looked out and I thought I saw some guy in like a van trying to contact me and I thought well that's my next-door neighbour or whatever cos I've seen him going in the house once. I went outside, just to check, and like a leaf fell from the tree and I thought I heard the leaf like saying something”*

Ben, aged 20



## Psychosis diagnoses

Psychosis is not a diagnosis, but some people who experience it may be given a mental health diagnosis. Sometimes a diagnosis is helpful, as it helps you and others to understand what's happening. It can also help you to get benefits and support so that you can do what you want to do in life, in your own time.

Several mental health diagnoses do involve unusual distressing (psychosis) experiences. These might include Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective disorder, Bipolar disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Drug-Induced Psychosis.

Different diagnoses are based on slightly different types of unusual experiences, how much they affect your emotions (happiness and sadness), how long they last and how much they affect your life overall.

Sometimes a diagnosis is not helpful, and this may be linked to stigma. If you are affected by psychosis, you may want to discuss with your Early Intervention team, whether a diagnosis will be helpful for you or not.



*"I think that fear of diagnosis is quite real in anyone"*  
Sean, aged 23

## Phases of psychosis

In an acute phase of psychosis, you might experience the paranoia and unusual experiences described above, but in a recovery phase you might:

- have similar but less upsetting beliefs and experiences
- have a loss of motivation, energy and interest in things
- have a loss of interest in your appearance
- stop washing, cooking or looking after yourself
- struggle to do things that you used to do like working, going to college, or seeing friends or family
- not feel quite right or not feel how you used to
- feel flat, depressed, empty, flat, angry about what has happened or worried about things getting worse again
- feel trapped, embarrassed or like you've failed because of psychosis
- be withdrawn or quiet
- have on-going problems with thinking, planning, organising and remembering things.

This stage can be difficult and recovery is a process that can take different amounts of time for different people. Recovery can take weeks or months.



*"Lots of people don't really know what it is. They just get the idea of a crazy person cos they don't really understand it"*  
Aaban, aged 22



## Early warning signs

A re-emergence of unusual experiences in a mild form, increased suspiciousness or changes in feelings or behaviour might be a sign that you (or your friend or relative) is becoming less well.

Generally, a re-emergence of psychosis symptoms is a late sign.

But earlier warning signs may be harder to separate from ordinary variations in life, and it's easy to get worried unnecessarily. After all, we all have periods where we feel upset or worried, or when we struggle at school or work. If problems like this last longer than a few weeks, they may be more significant.

Too much worry and stress is not helpful for anyone. If you're worried about an early change, talk to someone, like a friend, relative, or your EIP team. It is likely your team will work with you to understand triggers and early warning signs for becoming less well.

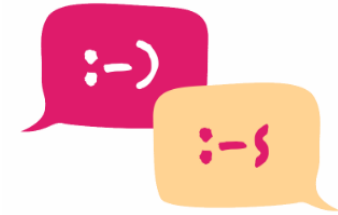
It's generally a good idea for friends and family to be involved too, as they can help you identify early warning signs.

## Where does psychosis come from?

It's tempting to look for someone to blame for mental health problems. You might have been spending time looking back at things that have happened in your life, or the life of your friend or

relative, looking for 'the thing' that caused the 'problem'.

You might remember a stressful time, a relationship break up, a house or school move, a family history of mental health problems.



If you are a relative or friend, you might think if only I had been a better mum, dad, sister, brother, relative or friend. You might blame someone else in the family or even the person themselves. You might think 'If only this hadn't happened, everything would be alright' or 'if only they'd stuck up for themselves at school and not let people get at them' or 'if only they hadn't taken drugs or fallen in with the wrong crowd'.

Just like with lots of aspects of life, psychosis develops because of a mix of genes, personality, sensitivity and things that you're born with, and things that happen to you (e.g. your environment, experience, stress, social life).

If you do develop a mental health problem, it's not because you've done something wrong and it's not your fault. This just isn't true.

We don't know *everything* about why people experience psychosis and other mental health problems, but we do know that there are several factors that contribute.

## Biology and genetics

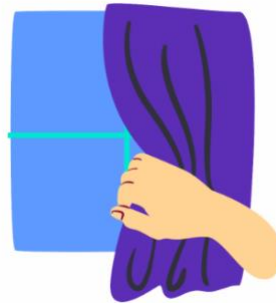
Just like your genes can make you more or less sensitive to health problems like asthma, heart disease or diabetes, your genes and biology can make you more or less sensitive to certain types of mental health problems too.



But, if someone in your family has a mental health problem, it doesn't automatically mean that you will have one too. Sometimes the genes you share can make a mental health problem more likely, but sometimes they don't have any effect at all.

## Life experiences

If you have a stressful experience when you are a child or a teenager, like experiencing bullying, trauma or abuse it can make relationships with other people more confusing or more difficult. This can sometimes contribute to mental health problems



## Social and lifestyle factors

Social and lifestyle factors like unhelpful coping strategies and responses to stress, poor sleep patterns and working too hard can contribute to the start of mental health problems.

These things won't *definitely* cause mental health problems but on top of other factors like genetics and life experiences, they may increase the risk.

Trying to care for our bodies, by exercising, eating and sleeping well, can be as important for our mental health as for our physical health.

Sometimes social and lifestyle factors can contribute to the start of mental health problems.

## Drugs and alcohol



Everyone who uses drugs or alcohol doesn't get a mental health problem or psychosis, but some people are more sensitive to the effects of drugs than others.

Using drugs, a lot, particularly when you are young, and especially when you're more sensitive or more affected by stresses can contribute to the start of mental health problems (like psychosis) or can make them worse.

There is a lot about mental health problems and psychosis that we still don't know.

You can have lots of risk factors, sensitivity and stress but be protected by other things in life and never develop mental health problems, or you can develop mental health problems after a build-up of day-to-day stresses.

If you are experiencing mental health problems or psychosis, talking to someone and getting some support may help you to understand what has contributed to this. Knowing what has contributed to mental health problems can help you to protect yourself in the future.



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## What is Early Intervention in Psychosis?

EIP stands for Early Intervention in Psychosis. EIP services work to support you with your mental health and your future.

EIP services work to support you to manage and recover from unusual distressing experience, to feel more positive, and to reduce the chances of problems coming back.

Care co-ordinators and other mental health professionals in EIP services work in lots of different ways to support you with different aspects of life; medical, psychological, social and physical, helping you with work, college, family and friends, relationships, where you live, money, drugs, alcohol and health.

EIP services offer support for 2 or 3 years, even if things get better after a few weeks. This is because sometimes unusual distressing experiences can come back. Getting the right support in the first few years is **really important** to give you the best chance of recovery and getting back on with your life.



*“My care-co-ordinator is really good at communicating and has patience and has the skills, is probably better equipped than, like a GP. She encounters psychosis on a day-to-day basis and she’s like, so brilliant at it and like, you know, anticipating how you’re gonna respond...”*

Sabah, aged 23

## For more information, please see our other booklets

You can get these free from your care co-ordinator, Early Intervention team or NHS likemind website: [www.likemind.nhs.uk](http://www.likemind.nhs.uk)

