

Getting help early involves recognising psychosis at the earliest possible time and finding appropriate specialist treatment.

Don't Delay

The initial episode of psychosis can be a particularly confusing and distressing experience for the individual and others. Changes in the person's behaviour can cause concern and distress because of a lack of understanding about what is happening.

This lack of understanding often leads to delays in seeking help. As a result, this treatable illness is sometimes left unrecognised and untreated. Even when help is sought, further delays may occur before the right diagnosis is made because recognition of first episode psychosis is not always straightforward.

Why Is It Important To Get Help Early?

Often there is a long delay before treatment begins for the first episode. The longer the illness is left untreated the greater the disruption to the person's family, friends, studies, and work.

The way that individuals feel about themselves can be adversely affected particularly if treatment is prolonged. Other problems may occur or intensify, such as unemployment, depression, substance misuse. Breaking the law and causing injury to themselves may occur or intensify. In addition, delays in treatment may lead to slower and less complete recovery.

If psychosis is detected and treated early, many problems can be prevented.

What Are The Early Signs?

Usually there are changes in a person before the obvious symptoms of psychosis develop. These changes are called early warning signs and this phase just before the psychosis is called the prodrome. Early signs can be vague and hardly noticeable. The important thing to look for is if these changes intensify or simply do not go away.

Early signs vary from person to person. In the prodromal phase, there may be changes in the way some people describe their feelings, thoughts and perceptions. However, they have not started experiencing clear psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, or confused thinking.

Early Signs

A person may become

- suspicious
- depressed
- anxious
- tense
- irritable
- angry

A person may experience

- mood swings
- sleep disturbances
- appetite changes
- loss of energy or motivation
- difficulty in concentrating or remembering things

A person may feel

- their thoughts have sped up or slowed down
- things are somehow different
- things around them seem changed

Family and friends may notice when

- a person's behaviour changes
- a person's studies or work deteriorates
- a person becomes more withdrawn or isolated
- a person is no longer interested in socialising
- a person becomes less active

Families often sense that something is not quite right even though they don't know exactly what the problem is.

These behaviours might be a brief reaction to stressful events like hassles at school or work or trouble with relationships. On the other hand they may be early warning signs of a developing psychosis. It is important that these behaviours are checked out.

The First Step

When these prodromal or psychotic symptoms appear it is important that the young person gets help. A good place to start is with a local GP, or a community health centre, or a community mental health service. School counsellors might also be available.

Remember these changes in behaviour may not be early warning signs but it is a good idea to get them checked out. If a psychotic disorder is developing the sooner the young person gets help the better.

The earlier psychosis is recognised and treatment commences, the better the outlook.

Further Information

Other information sheets are:

- What Is Psychosis? – Fact Sheet 1
- Recovering From Psychosis – Fact Sheet 3
- How Can I help Someone With Psychosis? – Fact Sheet 4

The EPPIC Information Sheets can be downloaded from either the EPPIC website www.eppic.org.au or the ORYGEN Youth Health website www.orygen.org.au and distributed freely without alterations.

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