

### Schizophreniform Disorder

Just like schizophrenia except that the symptoms have lasted for less than six months.

### Bipolar (Manic-Depressive) Disorder

In bipolar disorder, psychosis appears as part of a more general disturbance in mood, in which mood is characterised by extreme highs (mania) or lows (depression). When psychotic symptoms are present, they tend to fit in with the person's mood. For example, people who are depressed may hear voices telling them they should commit suicide. Someone who is unusually happy may believe they are special and can perform amazing feats.

### Schizoaffective Disorder

This diagnosis is made when the person has concurrent or consecutive symptoms of both a mood disorder (such as depression or mania) and psychosis. In other words the picture is not typical of a mood disorder or schizophrenia.

### Psychotic Depression

This is severe depression with psychotic symptoms mixed in, but without periods of mania or highs occurring at any point during the illness.

### What causes psychosis?

A number of theories have been suggested as to what causes psychosis, but there is still much research to be done.

Currently combinations of biological, psychological and social factors are thought to be involved. These factors are explained in the "Vulnerability – stress Model".

This model suggests that some people are more vulnerable to experiencing psychotic symptoms than others. When life events occur which stress these people beyond their ability to cope, this vulnerability is triggered and psychosis can occur.

Some people have a biological vulnerability which puts them at greater risk of experiencing psychosis. This vulnerability is thought to be caused by a dysfunction in the way certain chemicals in the brain (called neurotransmitters) behave.

There is evidence that this dysfunction is in part due to genetic inheritance, as people who have a family history of psychosis are at greater risk of experiencing an episode themselves. Genetic inheritance only provides part of the explanation, however, as most people who have a family history of psychosis will never experience a psychotic episode themselves. Other people are vulnerable to experiencing psychosis because they have a physical disturbance, such as a head injury, which increases their level of biological risk by altering the way in which their brain functions.

Together with this biological vulnerability certain people are thought to be at greater risk of developing psychosis because of their coping abilities. This refers to the way a person responds to stressful events in their life. Persons' coping abilities are affected by things such as the experiences they have had in the past, their health, their level of social support, their level of self-esteem and their knowledge of constructive ways to deal with problems. Each person's coping abilities are unique, and events which one person copes easily with may prove very difficult for another.

When an individual's coping abilities are *stressed* they may reach a point when things become too much for them to handle. If the person under stress is vulnerable to experiencing psychosis then this is the time when an episode may occur. The life events which can stress an individual's coping abilities include things such as pressures at school or work, the loss of a relationship, or factors such as abuse of alcohol or other drugs.

In first-episode psychosis, the cause is particularly unclear. It is, therefore, necessary for the person to have a thorough examination to make the diagnosis as clear as possible. This usually involves medical tests, as well as a detailed interview with a mental health specialist.

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## What is Psychosis?



The word psychosis is used to describe conditions which 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. Around three out of every 100 people will experience a psychotic episode making psychosis more common than diabetes. Most people make a recovery from the experience.

***Psychosis can happen to anyone. Like any other illness it can be treated.***

### What are the 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 beliefs**

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 which no one else can hear, or see things which are not 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 that 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.

***Psychosis has many forms. Course and outcome vary from person to person.***

### **First episode psychosis**

First-episode psychosis simply refers to the first time someone experiences psychotic symptoms or a psychotic episode. People experiencing a first episode psychosis may not understand what is happening. The symptoms can be highly disturbing and completely unfamiliar, leaving the person confused and distressed. This distress is increased by negative myths and stereotypes about mental illness which are still common in the community. A psychotic episode occurs in three phases. The length of each phase varies from person to person.

#### **Phase 1: Prodrome**

The early signs are vague and hardly noticeable. There may be changes in the way some people describe their feelings, thoughts and perceptions.

#### **Phase 2: Acute**

Clear psychotic symptoms are experienced, such as hallucinations, delusions or confused thinking.

#### **Phase 3: Recovery**

Psychosis is treatable and most people recover. The pattern of recovery varies from person to person.

***People recover from first-episode psychosis. Many never experience another psychotic episode.***



### **What are the types of psychosis?**

Everyone's experience of psychosis is different and attaching a specific name or label to the psychotic illness is not always useful in the early stages. However, when someone has a psychosis, a diagnosis of a particular psychotic illness is usually given. Diagnosis means identification of an illness by a person's symptoms and the diagnosis will depend on what brought on the illness and how long the symptoms last. When someone is experiencing a psychotic episode for the first time, it is particularly difficult to diagnose the exact type of psychosis, because many of the factors which determine the label remain unclear. Nevertheless, it is useful to be familiar with some of the labels you might hear.

#### **Drug Induced Psychosis**

Use of, or withdrawal from, alcohol and drugs can be associated with the appearance of psychotic symptoms. Sometimes these symptoms will rapidly resolve as the effects of the substances wear off. In other cases, the illness may last longer, but begin with drug-induced psychosis.

#### **Organic Psychosis**

Sometimes psychotic symptoms may appear as part of a head injury or a physical illness which disrupts brain functioning, such as encephalitis, AIDS or a tumour. There are usually other symptoms present, such as memory problems or confusion.

#### **Brief Reactive Psychosis**

Psychotic symptoms arise suddenly in response to a major stress in the person's life, such as a death in the family or change of living circumstance. Symptoms can be severe, but the person makes a quick recovery in only a few days.

#### **Delusional Disorder**

The main problem is a strong belief in things that are not true.

#### **Schizophrenia**

Schizophrenia refers to a psychotic illness in which the changes in behaviour or symptoms have been continuing for a period of at least six months. The symptoms and length of the illness vary from person to person. Contrary to previous beliefs, many people with schizophrenia lead happy and fulfilling lives, with many making a full recovery.