

PSYCHOSIS AND SCHIZOPHRENIA



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE **Eastern Mediterranean**

What is psychosis?

Psychosis is a condition that affects a person's mind and distorts the way they think and understand the world around them. The affected person loses contact with reality and is not aware that their thoughts and perceptions are unreal, which may make them feel frightened or distressed.

They are not able to undertake their usual responsibilities related to family, work, school or social activities.

Violence and aggression are uncommon in people with psychosis. They are more likely to be victims of human rights violations and violence.

What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a chronic and severe psychotic disorder affecting more than 21 million people worldwide. It is associated with considerable disability and may negatively affect educational and occupational performance.

People with schizophrenia are two to three times more likely to die early than the general population. This is often due to preventable physical diseases, such as heart disease, metabolic diseases like diabetes and infections.

People with schizophrenia often face stigma, discrimination and violations of their human rights.

Common signs and symptoms of psychosis

- **Hallucinations:** hearing, seeing, smelling and/or feeling things that only exist in the patient's mind.
- **Delusions:** having a fixed belief about some thing, event or person that is not real. Nothing can convince the patient that their idea is wrong even when there is clear proof to the contrary; for example, believing an individual or organization is making plans to hurt or kill them or they are a very important person like a president or a prophet.

- **Incoherent/irrelevant speech:** jumping from one topic to another with no rational connection or saying incomplete sentences.
- **Abnormal behaviour:** disorganized behaviour such as wandering aimlessly, mumbling or laughing to oneself, having a strange appearance or not caring about one's appearance.
- **Disturbance of emotions:** being indifferent or showing inappropriate emotion; for example, in a happy situation the patient's face shows no sign of happiness.

What causes psychosis?

- **Mental illnesses.** Schizophrenia (see above) is the most important psychosis, but psychotic features can occur in other mental disorders along with their main signs and symptoms. Such disorders include depression, bipolar disorder and post-partum conditions (see the WHO factsheets on these different disorders for more information).
- **Physical diseases:** some medical conditions may have psychotic features, especially at an advanced stage, for example, malaria, Alzheimer's disease, syphilis and brain tumors.
- **Substances:** drugs known for their potential to trigger a psychotic reaction include amphetamines, MDMA (ecstasy), cannabis, LSD (acid), psilocybins (magic mushrooms) and ketamine.
- **Stressful life events** like exposure to live threatening events, severe traumatic events, losing a close friend or relative can sometimes trigger a psychotic reaction or episode.

Treating psychosis

Psychosis/schizophrenia is a treatable condition. Treatment with medicines and psycho-social interventions is effective. However, people with psychosis/schizophrenia may require long-term treatment, and some decline in general functioning may remain even if treatment is successful. Early treatment may help to bring symptoms under control before serious complications develop, and may improve the long-term outlook.

A doctor will do a complete assessment to establish what triggered the psychotic episode. Sometimes the patient needs to stay in the hospital to control acute symptoms or extreme agitation, or if there is a threat of their harming themselves or others.

Antipsychotics – medications used to control the symptoms of psychosis – should be started as soon as a psychotic episode is diagnosed. The patient may need to take them for months or years.

Agitation and anxiety are among the first symptoms to subside. It may take from several days to six weeks to see the effect of antipsychotics in controlling delusions and hallucinations.

Antipsychotics may have side effects such as drowsiness, shaking and trembling, weight gain, restlessness, muscle spasms, dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision and dizziness.

There are different psychotherapy approaches: cognitive behavioural therapy, training in problem-solving skills, family therapy and education.

Psycho-education is needed for patients and their families to learn about the psychosis, how to prevent or reduce the risk of episodes, and how to live with it.

How can you help yourself?

- Continue your regular social activities, studies or job, as far as possible. However, it may not be healthy for you to remain in a high-stress working or home environment.
- Take medicines as directed by your doctor and never stop them by yourself, even if you feel better.
- Talk to your doctor about the side effects of medicines. Contact your doctor if you notice any side effects. You may be able to replace the medicines that you are taking or take additional medicines to counter their side effects.
- You have the right to be involved in every decision concerning your treatment.
- Stay healthy: eat a healthy diet, get regular sleep, exercise and maintain your personal hygiene.
- Know your symptoms and what triggers them. Try to avoid triggers, and contact a care giver or doctor as soon as you feel them coming on.

How can you help a friend or family member who has psychosis?

- Remember that someone with psychosis may hear voices or firmly believe in things that are untrue. Listen to them without criticizing them.
- Someone with psychosis will often not agree that they are ill, and may sometimes be hostile.
- Symptoms are recurrent in most patients. You need to help them get treatment (medication and psychotherapy). Look out for warning symptoms, and support them in getting help if you notice these symptoms.
- Respect their wishes and do not try to make decisions for them. People with psychosis are often discriminated against. They should enjoy the same rights as everyone else.

- 
- Mobilize the patient's social support network: inform their family members, friends, or anyone who cares for them about the situation, to maintain care and support for as long as needed.
 - In general, it is better for the person to live in their house and in the community, in a supportive environment. Try to involve them in family activities as far as possible.
 - Long-term hospitalization should be avoided.
 - People with psychosis are at increased risk of suicide, so it is important to be alert for warning signs.

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the WHO website at: www.emro.who.int/mnh.