



EARLY DETECTION & TREATMENT OF PSYCHOSIS EDUCATION SERIES

Psychosis: How to Get Help

“Looking back on the year prior to getting treatment for psychosis, I can identify that things started to change for me in my first year of university. I went from being an average “B” student, outgoing and interested in sports, to someone who was failing school, feeling down, irritable and alone. By the time I quit school in the beginning of the second year, I remember sleeping all day and being up through the night. This was a very confusing time for me and my family. I started drinking a lot of alcohol. It seemed to make me feel better. My family tried to get help but I didn’t think there was anything wrong. It wasn’t until a year later when I started telling people about the voices and music in my head, that other people figured out I had a medical condition -- psychosis. I have now recovered, but I can’t help but wonder how things might have been different had I been seen earlier by someone who specializes in this area.”

Why Get Help Early?

There is often a delay between the time when a person first experiences psychosis and when treatment is started. Research suggests that the longer the period of untreated psychosis, the slower and less complete the recovery.

While experiencing psychosis, it is difficult for people to function. Psychosis can disrupt relationships and interfere with learning or work. The longer psychosis is left untreated, the more likely it is that other problems will develop. These may include: anxiety, depression, job loss, alcohol or drug use, self-harm or problems with the law.

In almost all cases, psychosis will get worse if left untreated. Many problems can be prevented if psychosis is detected and treated early.

Phases of Psychosis

A psychotic episode (loss of contact with reality) can be described as having three phases: Prodrome, Acute Psychosis and Recovery. **Prodrome** refers to the time during which the first changes in behaviour, feelings or thoughts occur. **Acute psychosis** is the time when clear psychotic symptoms are experienced, such as hallucinations, delusions or disorganized thinking. **Recovery** may be rapid but more often it is a gradual process which takes weeks or months. Gradually symptoms lessen and people resume their usual activities.

What Are the Early Signs of Psychosis?

Early warning signs of psychosis vary from person to person. Some people experience a very short *prodrome*, while for others it may last for months or even years. One of the most common signs of early psychosis is **social withdrawal**. During the prodrome phase, many people isolate themselves from family, friends and colleagues. A person may become depressed, suspicious, nervous and irritable, and may not look after oneself in the way one usually would. Other early signs include altered sleeping patterns, decreased interest in usual activities, poor concentration and memory. Family or friends frequently are the first to notice the changes.

Where is Help Available?

When the individual with psychosis or their family recognize that something is wrong, they may be unsure where to go for help. Getting help can be a puzzling and unsettling time. There are a number of different routes to care. A family doctor could refer them to a mental health care professional. Others seek services directly from a mental health community clinic.

If you feel something is wrong, keep asking questions and insist on seeing someone who is knowledgeable about early psychosis.

What Help is Available?

People who are experiencing a psychotic episode must get prompt treatment for their condition.

The first step in treatment is for the mental health professional to gain a better understanding of the changes in thinking, behaviour and feelings which have been experienced. Care providers also gather information about the individual's physical well-being, since different medical conditions and some medications can lead to psychosis.

Based on the information obtained, the mental health treatment team will determine what is likely causing the changes.

There are different causes of psychosis, which include:

- **brief reactive psychosis:** appears to follow a major stress and may clear up within a few days
- **drug induced psychosis:** symptoms related to using or withdrawing from alcohol, some street/prescription drugs
- **organic psychosis:** resulting from a medical condition or disease; e.g. thyroid problems, AIDS
- **schizophrenia:** a name given to a number of related brain disorders
- **depression with psychotic symptoms or features:** psychosis is associated with severe depression
- **bipolar disorder (manic-depressive illness):** illness related to extreme high (manic) or low moods

During the early phases of psychosis, it is often difficult to determine the cause. After a more thorough assessment which includes some laboratory tests, the causes will become clearer. These tests usually take time to complete.

Key Points

- The earlier psychosis is detected and treated, the better the recovery.
- Psychosis usually has three phases: Prodrome, Acute Psychosis and Recovery.
- Early signs of psychosis can be puzzling.
- People with symptoms of early psychosis need to be seen by experienced health care professionals.

For More Information Contact:

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