

Psychosis

Explains what psychosis is, including possible causes and how you can access treatment and support. Includes tips for helping yourself, and guidance for friends and family.

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What is psychosis?

Psychosis (also called a 'psychotic experience' or 'psychotic episode') is when you perceive or interpret reality in a very different way from people around you. You might be said to 'lose touch' with reality.

The most common types of psychotic experiences are hallucinations, delusions and disorganised thinking and speech. For more information on these see our page on types of psychosis.

Psychosis affects people in different ways. You might experience it once, have short episodes throughout your life, or live with it most of the time.

Some people have positive experiences of psychosis. For example, if you see the faces of loved ones or hear their voices you may find this comforting. Some people say it helps them understand the world or makes them more creative.

"Twelve years on, I can reflect upon my experience as a transformative one."

However, for other people psychosis can be a very difficult or frightening experience. You may find that it:

- affects your behaviour or disrupts your life
- makes you feel very tired or overwhelmed
- makes you feel anxious, scared, threatened or confused
- leaves you finding it very difficult to trust some organisations or people.

It can also be upsetting if people around you dismiss your experiences as untrue when they seem very real to you. You may feel misunderstood and frustrated if other people don't understand. It might help to share our section for friends and family with them.

"The sense of shame and guilt I felt because was I incapable of functioning day-to-day as an adult left me isolated from others and aggressive to those who cared and wanted to help."

Is psychosis a diagnosis or a symptom?

The word psychosis is usually used to refer to an experience. It is a symptom of certain mental health problems rather than a diagnosis itself.

Doctors and psychiatrists may describe someone as experiencing psychosis rather than giving them a specific diagnosis. Some people prefer this.

If you are diagnosed with one or more of these conditions then you may experience psychosis. Alternatively, if you experience psychosis (and you have other symptoms too), then you may be given one of these diagnoses:

- [severe depression](#)
- [schizophrenia](#)
- [bipolar disorder](#)
- schizoaffective disorder
- [paranoid personality disorder](#) or [schizotypal personality disorder](#)
- postpartum psychosis

- delusional disorder.

Some people experience psychosis on its own. If you experience psychosis for less than a month and your doctor doesn't think that another diagnosis describes your symptoms better, you may receive the diagnosis of 'brief psychotic disorder'.

See our types of psychosis and causes of psychosis pages for more information.

Psychosis and stigma

There are a lot of misunderstandings about what it means to experience psychosis. Lots of people wrongly think that the word 'psychotic' means 'dangerous'. The media often shows people with psychosis behaving like this even though very few people who experience psychosis ever hurt anyone else.

It's important to remember that you aren't alone and you don't have to put up with people treating you badly. For some suggestions on things you can do to tackle stigma have a look at our information page on stigma and misconceptions.

What types of psychosis are there?

This section covers:

- hallucinations
- delusions
- disorganised thinking and speech

Hallucinations

Hallucinations could include:

- seeing things that other people don't (for example people's faces, animals or religious figures)
- seeing objects that seem to be distorted or move in ways that they usually wouldn't
- experiencing tastes, smells and sensations that have no apparent cause (for example feeling insects crawling on your skin)
- hearing voices that other people don't (these could be positive and helpful or hostile and nasty).

"I felt as though I was in wonderland. None of my family or friends understood why... I had a calling from a voice in sky. I was lost and lonely."

Delusions

Lots of people have beliefs that many other people don't share. But a delusion is usually a belief that nobody else shares and which other experiences or perceptions show cannot be true. It is natural for delusions to feel completely real to you when you are experiencing them.

You might think that you are a very important person. For example, you may believe that you are rich and powerful or that you can control the stock markets or the weather. These kinds of beliefs are sometimes called 'delusions of grandeur'.

Some people find that they can spend a lot of money or take on a lot of debt while they are experiencing psychosis, because their sense of reality has been affected. See our pages on money and mental health for more information and support.

Some delusions can be very frightening and can make you feel threatened or unsafe. For example, you might feel that something or someone is trying to control, harm or kill you (even when you have no reason to believe this). These ideas are sometimes called paranoid delusions.

Disorganised thinking and speech

Hallucinations and delusions can make your thoughts and emotions feel confused and disorganised, but disorganised thinking (sometimes called 'formal thought disorder') can also be a specific type of psychosis.

Mental health professionals may use the following terms to describe what you are experiencing:

- **Racing thoughts** is when your thoughts go through your head very fast. It can involve them racing so fast that they feel out of control.
- **Flight of ideas** is where your thoughts move very quickly from idea to idea, making links and seeing meaning between things that other people don't.

Many people find that they experience racing thoughts and flight of ideas at the same time. If you have disorganised thinking you might:

- **Speak very quickly and stumble over your words.** Other people may find it difficult to understand what you're saying.
- **Link words together because of the way they sound** rather than what they mean. This can mean your speech sounds jumbled and doesn't make sense to other people. This is sometimes called word salad.
- **Change the topic of conversation very quickly** as your thoughts move from one thing to another.
- **Find it difficult to keep your attention** on one thing.

"Racing ideas flooded my mind. It seemed as though my mind was disintegrating, my inner life – my unconscious mind – started flooding my consciousness without a break."

You may also have racing thoughts and flight of ideas if you experience [mania or hypomania](#). If you only experience them during a depressive, manic or mixed episode then you may be given a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

See our pages on [bipolar disorder](#) for more information.

What causes psychosis?

The cause of psychosis can be different for everyone, and research into it is happening all the time. Psychosis could be triggered by a number of things, such as:

- **Physical illness or injury.** You may see or hear things if you have a high fever, head injury, or lead or mercury poisoning. If you have Alzheimer's disease or Parkinson's disease you may also experience hallucinations or delusions.
- **Abuse or trauma.** If you have experienced abuse or a traumatic event, you are more likely to experience psychosis.
- **Recreational drugs.** Researchers still aren't sure whether using recreational drugs directly causes psychosis but you may be more likely to hear or see things as a result of taking [certain recreational drugs](#), like cannabis and LSD. If you have already experienced psychosis, using recreational drugs can make the symptoms worse, in particular if you take high-potency cannabis.
- **Alcohol and smoking.** Drinking [alcohol](#) and smoking may also stop medication from effectively treating your symptoms, making relapse more likely.
- **Prescribed medication.** You might also experience psychosis as a side effect of some prescribed drugs or while you are coming off psychiatric drugs.

"It's an illness that can be treated just like any other. I don't choose or want to be psychotic any more than people choose or want any other types of ill health."

- **Hunger.** You may experience hallucinations if you are very hungry, have low blood sugar or if you are [not getting enough food](#).
- **Lack of sleep.** You may experience hallucinations if you have a [severe lack of sleep](#).
- **Bereavement.** If you have recently been bereaved, you may hear them talking to you. You may also feel that they are with you even though you can't see them.
- **Spiritual experiences.** Some people experience voices or visions as part of a spiritual experience. This may be a positive experience for you. It may make you feel special or important and help you make sense of your life. It could however also be a negative experience – for example, you may feel that you're possessed by an evil spirit.
- **Genetic inheritance.** You are more likely to develop psychosis if you have a parent or sibling who has experienced psychosis, but researchers aren't sure why this happens.

How can I help myself?

These suggestions could help you cope with psychosis. You may choose to try them on their own or alongside treatment.

Try peer support

[Peer support](#) brings together people who've had similar experiences to support each other. You could access peer support online or try a support group in your local area.

You can find peer support groups for psychosis through:

See our [Community Directory](#) for more information to support.

Recognise your triggers

It might be helpful to keep a diary of things that might have triggered a psychotic experience, such as:

- life events
- your mood
- your diet
- lack of sleep

You could do this in a notebook or use an app or online tool. See our [useful contacts](#) page for a list of apps you could explore.

Keeping a diary can help you:

- understand what triggers your psychosis or makes it worse
- think about what has been helpful in the past
- recognise warning signs that tell you when you are becoming unwell.

Once you have a better understanding of your triggers, you can try to take steps to avoid or manage them. If you learn to recognise your warning signs, you can take action early to try and prevent your psychosis getting worse.

Family and friends may also be able to help you spot when you are becoming unwell, including noticing early symptoms before your experience psychosis.

Learn to relax

- **Manage your stress.** Our pages on [managing stress](#) can help you manage pressure and build up your coping skills.
- **Try some relaxation techniques.** Our pages on [relaxation](#) have lots of suggestions for looking after your wellbeing when you are feeling stressed, anxious or busy.

"I painted regularly - something I hadn't done for years but felt inspired to do."

Look after your physical health

Looking after your physical health can make a difference to how you feel emotionally. For example, it can help to:

- Try to get enough sleep. Sleep can help give you the energy to cope with difficult feelings and experiences. See our pages on [coping with sleep problems](#).
- Think about your diet. Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels. See our pages on food and mood.
- Try to do some physical activity. Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing. See our pages on physical activity.
- Spend time outside. Spending time in green space can boost your wellbeing. See our pages on nature and mental health.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol. While you might want to use drugs or alcohol to cope with difficult feelings, in the long run they can make you feel a lot worse and can

prevent you from dealing with any underlying problems that the drug or alcohol use may have been masking. See our pages on [recreational drugs and alcohol](#).

"I think a routine of structure, quiet and an unpressurised environment, combined with medication, was ultimately the key to my recovery."

Create a crisis plan

During a crisis you may not be able to tell people what helps you. When you are feeling well it can be a good idea to talk to someone you trust about what you would like to happen (or not to happen) when you are in crisis.

It might help to create a crisis plan. See our page on crisis plans for more information.

"Thankfully I am now over the worse of it and am currently living a much happier life."

What treatments are there for psychosis?

For many people, there is no quick and simple treatment for psychosis, but with the right support it is possible to manage the symptoms of psychosis and recover.

This does not mean that the experience of psychosis will go away entirely. You may find that you still experience symptoms during and after treatment. What treatment can do though is help you learn ways of coping so that your experiences are less distressing and don't interfere with your life as much.

How do doctors decide my treatment?

Before you start any treatment, your mental health professionals should discuss all your options with you and listen to what you want. They should look at all aspects of your life including your environment, culture and ethnicity, and any possible physical causes of your psychosis.

Your treatment may depend on whether you are diagnosed with a specific mental health problem. It may be that psychosis is one of several symptoms you're experiencing, which will influence what treatment you are offered.

An advocate can help you get the treatment you need. See our pages on advocacy for more information.

What treatment is available?

- **Talking therapies** can help you understand your experiences and develop coping strategies to deal with them. You may be offered 'cognitive behavioural therapy for psychosis' (sometimes called CBTp). This is a type of [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#) specifically for people experiencing psychosis.
- **Anti-psychotic medication** is offered to most people with psychosis, as a way of managing symptoms. You may also be offered other drugs (for example antidepressants or mood stabilisers) if you experience mood based symptoms, as well as additional medication to help reduce the side effects caused by the antipsychotics.

- **Arts therapies** can help you express how you are feeling in different ways. They can be helpful if you are having difficulty talking about your experience.
- **Family intervention** focuses on helping family members talk to each other about what helps, solve problems and plan for a crisis. Your GP will be able to find out if this is available in your area.

"My antipsychotic medication saved my life. It took many tries to get the right medication for me."

What other support can I get?

Early intervention (EI) teams

Early intervention (EI) teams work with you during your first experience of psychosis. They usually include people who can help you in different ways. For example:

- psychiatrists
- psychologists
- community mental health nurses
- social workers
- support workers.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that early intervention services should be open to people of all ages. But some places only offer services to people under a certain age – usually under 35.

Community care

If you experience psychosis a lot or it lasts a long time, you may be referred to community care services to help you cope. The phrase 'community care' is used to describe the various services available to help you manage your physical and mental health problems in the community. This might include:

- your community mental health services (e.g. ICCMWs)
- nursing or social work support
- home help
- day centres
- supported accommodation.

Community care can also include crisis services and early intervention teams.

If you become very distressed during an episode of psychosis you may need to be cared for in hospital.

"A stay in intensive care saved my life, followed by three months on a psychiatric ward."

How can friends and family help?

This section is for friends and family who would like to support someone they know who experiences psychosis.

"You can help by lending an ear to talk to, especially between visits from mental health professionals."

It can be really hard to see someone you care about experiencing psychosis. But there are some things you can do to try and help. This page has some suggestions for ways you can support them while also looking after your own wellbeing.

- **Listen and try to understand.** It can help if your loved one feels able to discuss their feelings and options with someone supportive and calm. Listen to their experiences and ask them what would help. Our information can help you understand more about psychosis.
- **Focus on feelings rather than experiences.** It's hard to know how to respond when someone sees, hears or believes something that you don't. Instead of confirming or denying their experience it can help to say something like "I understand that you see things that way, but it's not like that for me". It's usually more helpful to focus on how the person is feeling about what they are experiencing.
- **Offer practical help.** Ask them if they would like any practical help. For example they may like your help to access a particular service or ask you to act as an advocate for them.

"The extremes of behaviour and emotions played havoc with my relationships and daily functioning, to the point where the simplest of tasks overwhelmed me."

- **Respect their wishes.** Even if you feel that you know what's best, it's important to respect their wishes and don't try and take over or make decisions without them. People tend to do less well if family and friends are very critical or over-protective.
- **Family intervention.** Family intervention can help the whole family understand what the person with psychosis is going through and identify what is helpful and unhelpful for them and for you. You might want to ask your GP if this is available in your area.
- **Plan for a crisis.** When your loved one is feeling well you may want to discuss and plan how you can help them in a crisis. This could include planning practical things like treatment and hospital visits. You might also find it helpful to state clearly what you feel you can and can't support them with during a crisis.
- **Get support for yourself.** Seeing someone you care about experiencing psychosis can be distressing or frightening. Our information on [how to cope when supporting someone else](#) and [how to improve your mental wellbeing](#) can help you look after yourself too.

Help in an emergency

If you are worried that your family member or friend is becoming very unwell or experiencing a mental health crisis you could suggest that they use their crisis plan (if they have one).

Useful Contacts

Other organisations

Bipolar HK

<https://bipolarhk.com/>

Peer-led bipolar support network

E.A.S.Y service

<https://www3.ha.org.hk/easy/eng/index.html>

The E.A.S.Y. (Early Assessment Service for Young People with Early Psychosis) Programme is a service programme for people suffering from early psychosis.

Early Psychosis Foundation

<http://www.episo.org/>

Early Psychosis Foundation (EPISO) consists of experienced professionals and academics in the field of early psychosis. The society aims to make accessible knowledge and experience gained from research and clinical practice to promote high-quality early psychosis intervention services, professional training, and public awareness programs.

iPEP

<http://ipep.hk/en>

iPEP is an online psycho-educational platform, planned and implemented by the Department of Psychiatry in the University of Hong Kong. It is a tailor-made website for psychotic patients and their families. Through interactive ways, the website offers up-to-date information to assist caregivers to understand psychosis and support patients.

Mood Diaries

medhelp.org/land/mood-tracker moodscope.com moodchart.org
moodpanda.com

Some examples of mood diaries – many more are available. Mind HK doesn't endorse any particular one.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

nice.org.uk

Produces guidelines on best practice in healthcare.

New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association

<https://www.nlpra.org.hk/default.aspx>

Provides support and information for anyone affected by mental health problems, including local support groups.

For more support options

Non-urgent support options, including low-cost services:

www.mind.org.hk/community-directory/

Access to quick mental health information via Help Me virtual assistant:

www.mind.org.hk/help-me/

What to do in a crisis

If you are in a crisis situation where you feel that you need urgent help:

If you feel able to, you can speak to a trusted friend or family member, or a medical or mental health professional. Starting the conversation can be hard, but these people want to talk to you and help you to cope.

If you think you may act on suicidal feelings, or you have seriously harmed yourself: Phone **999** or go to your nearest **A&E department**.

Suicide 24 Hour Hotlines:

The Samaritans Befrienders: **23892222**

The Samaritans (multilingual): **28960000**

Suicide Prevention Services (Cantonese only): **23820000**

For more places to seek urgent support (including additional hotlines):

www.mind.org.hk/find-help-now/

For further information on how to seek help in Hong Kong visit:

www.mind.org.hk/getting-help/

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About Mind HK

Mind HK is a registered S88 charity (91/16471) committed to improving awareness and understanding of mental health in Hong Kong. We collaborate with other local and international mental health charities and provide online support and training programmes, based on global best practice, to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem and equip them with the resources they need. Through collaborative research, Mind HK is leading the way in understanding mental health problems in the city and providing its population with the right support and resources.

For more on Mind HK and its mission and vision, please visit: www.mind.org.hk



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