

# UNDERSTANDING A FIRST EPISODE OF PSYCHOSIS

## Young Adult: Get the Facts

What does it mean when a health care professional says a “first episode of psychosis”?



Hearing a health care professional say you are experiencing a first episode of psychosis can be confusing. The good news is that the behaviors you have been concerned about are actually symptoms that can be treated with treatment and recovery efforts. Recovery does not necessarily mean a cure. It does mean that people are actively moving toward wellness.

“ Strangely, I was relieved when I got a diagnosis and my life began making sense, then healing began. ”  
—Darrin, Youth

It is important to talk with a health care provider about treatment options and additional information. Your provider may be a child and adolescent psychiatrist, general psychiatrist, psychologist, pediatrician, social worker, or other health care provider. If you are concerned that you may be experiencing a first episode of psychosis, it is important to seek a thorough evaluation. The evaluation includes talking about your symptoms, blood and urine tests, potentially a brain scan, and perhaps other tests to ensure that there is no underlying medical condition that could be causing the symptoms. It is also important to ensure that you can tolerate medication, if recommended as part of the treatment plan.

### What do we mean by recovery?

*Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.<sup>1</sup>*

*Recovery focuses on wellness and resilience, encouraging [people] to participate actively in their own care.<sup>2</sup>*



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## What is psychosis, and what is meant by hallucinations, delusions and confused thinking?

Psychosis includes symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, or confused thinking.

- *Hallucinations* are things you hear, see, smell, taste, or feel that no one else can hear, see, smell, taste, or feel. Voices are the most common type of hallucination.
- *Delusions* are fixed, false beliefs that seem real to you. You may feel that a friend or neighbor is spying on you or wants to harm you or people you care about or that others are controlling your thinking.
- *Confused thinking* is a change in the way you think. Your thoughts may be very fast or slow or may stop suddenly. Sometimes you might feel as though you cannot control them. You might find it hard to concentrate, or you might have disorganized speech, such as shifting rapidly from one topic to another.

## What caused this?

Psychosis itself is a cluster of symptoms that can be due to medical conditions, prescription drugs, substance use, or toxicities, as well as psychiatric disorders. The most common cause of a first episode of psychosis in young adults is schizophrenia. There are other disorders that your healthcare provider will also consider.<sup>4</sup> Medical professionals understand how the symptoms of psychosis are produced in only a few of these disorders. Some of the disorders have a genetic basis (i.e., family history of psychotic disorders). Others have an environmental basis and frequently psychosis is the result of a combination of these factors. Your health care provider will consider all of these factors and help you to understand how and why psychosis developed in your circumstances. Traumatic experiences can also add to the development of mental disorders. If you have experienced a traumatic incident, it is important to share that information with your mental health specialist and pediatrician.

## How common is this disorder?

The worldwide rate of schizophrenia is generally thought to be approximately 1%, with some variation noted across studies and populations. The peak ages of onset for the disorder ranges from 15 to 30 years. Early onset schizophrenia tends to occur more often in male individuals. As age increases, males and females tend to have the same rate of schizophrenia.<sup>5</sup>

The symptoms of psychosis make it harder or impossible for a person to know what is real, to think clearly, to communicate, relate to others, and to feel emotions. These symptoms, and others, may mark the beginning of a serious medical/psychiatric disorder. Psychoses can be treated, and the sooner treatment begins, the better the outcome will be. Treatment that involves medications and other elements of an individualized treatment program can help you to be more resilient, manage the condition, improve your everyday functioning, and help you to achieve your personal goals. An individualized treatment program can include positive family or peer support.



## What do we mean by resilience?

*Resilience is the ability to respond to stress, anxiety, trauma, crisis, or disaster. It is critical in recovery [from mental disorders].<sup>3</sup>*

## What are the treatment approaches?

Medication is essential in the treatment of psychosis. Coordinated specialty care programs offer the most effective early treatment for psychosis and combines an array of services and supports.<sup>6</sup> Medication relieves symptoms and plays a critical role in preventing further episodes. Psychotherapy can help you understand and cope with the everyday challenges of the medical condition, such as difficulty with communication, taking care of yourself, work, and relationships. It is important to talk to your health care providers about other types of treatment, such as complementary medicine, as well as programs that can provide additional support related to education, employment, housing, and vocation and career development. It is also important to have good self-care, such as a healthy diet, exercise, sleep, and abstinence from illicit drugs. You should collaborate with your family and health care provider to consider treatment options. Decisions should include the severity of symptoms and fit your own priorities and goals.

“ Finding a mental health professional that I felt comfortable with sharing my thoughts and feelings was imperative. ”

—Hayden, Youth

### *Medications*

Medications used to treat the symptoms of psychosis are referred to as antipsychotic medications. A variety of medications are available, and research shows that they are effective in treating a first episode of psychosis and future episodes. Each person reacts differently to these medications. For that reason, your prescribing health care professional may try different doses and different kinds of medication before finding the most effective approach. Treatment may begin with medication. If side effects develop, your prescribing health care professional may use a lower dose, add a medication to reduce the side effects, or recommend a different medication altogether. Most medications must be taken every day in order to be safe and effective—always let your prescribing health care professional know right away if you miss doses or intend to stop antipsychotic medication.

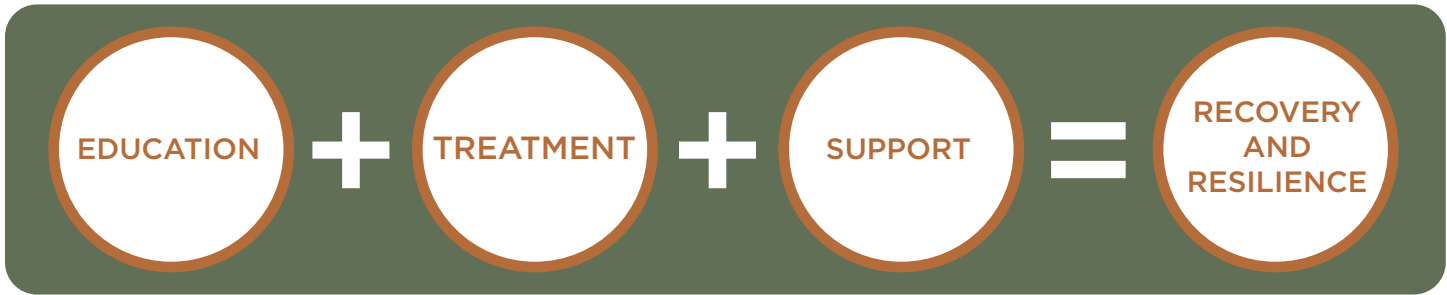
### *Therapy*

Psychotherapy, including cognitive behavioral therapy, social skills training, and other forms of therapy can help you. Therapy can help reduce common symptoms and problems that you may experience. Therapy can also help you manage stress, avoid triggers, and learn coping strategies. Recovery After an Initial Schizophrenia Episode (RAISE) is an emerging evidence based practice that uses a coordinated specialty care approach to improve the lives of youth and young adults who are experiencing a first episode of psychosis.

### *Support*

Your family or peers who have lived through similar challenges can also be an important part of your treatment or treatment team for psychosis. Talking with peers lets you learn from others who are further along in recovery. Supportive family members, caregivers, and peers can be part of your treatment or treatment team. These partners can provide valuable support and encouragement so you can stay focused on your recovery and life goals. If you are of consenting age, you may need to provide written consent for parents or caregivers to participate on the treatment team.

Be sure to report any problems or changes to your prescriber, including any use of drugs or medications, smoking, excessive caffeine intake (energy drinks), or alcohol use. Sometimes when people try to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, symptoms of psychosis often get worse. If you have thoughts or plans to harm yourself or others, contact your prescriber or the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255)** or via the web chat function at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org> immediately.



Where can I learn more and get support?



**American Psychological Association**  
<http://www.apa.org/topics/bipolar/index.aspx>

**Encouraging People to Seek Help for Early Psychosis**  
[https://www.nami.org/getattachment/Learn-More/Infographics-Fact-Sheets/tipsheet\\_earlypsychosis\\_04v2-\(1\).pdf](https://www.nami.org/getattachment/Learn-More/Infographics-Fact-Sheets/tipsheet_earlypsychosis_04v2-(1).pdf)

**Find Youth Info**  
<http://www.findyouthinfo.gov>

**Mental Health America**  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net>

**National Alliance on Mental Illness**  
[www.nami.org/earlypsychosis](http://www.nami.org/earlypsychosis)

**National Center for Complementary & Integrative Health**  
<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health>

**National Institute of Mental Health**  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/schizophrenia/index.shtml>

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**  
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>  
 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

**Ok2Talk**  
<http://ok2talk.org>

**RAISE Resources for Patients and their Families**  
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/schizophrenia/raise/raise-resources-for-patients-and-families.shtml>

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**  
<http://www.samhsa.gov/disorders/mental>

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline:** <http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

**Teen Mental Health**  
<http://teenmentalhealth.org>

**What is Early and First-Episode Psychosis?**  
[https://www.nami.org/getattachment/Learn-More/Infographics-Fact-Sheets/tipsheet\\_earlypsychosis\\_01v3.pdf](https://www.nami.org/getattachment/Learn-More/Infographics-Fact-Sheets/tipsheet_earlypsychosis_01v3.pdf)

**Youth Motivating Others through Voices of Experience**  
<http://www.youthmovenational.org>

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**REFERENCES:**

<sup>1</sup> (2012). *SAMHSA's Working Definition of Recovery*. SAMHSA.

<sup>2</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2005). *Position Statement on Use of the Concept of Recovery*.

<sup>3</sup> (2013). *SAMHSA Annotated Bibliography*.

<sup>4</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2015). *Understanding Mental Disorders: Your Guide to DSM-5*. (D. W. Black, Ed.) Washington DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, J.J. (2006). Variations in the Incidence of Schizophrenia: Data Versus Dogma. *Schizophrenia Bull* 32, 195-197.

<sup>6</sup> RAISE: Coordinated Specialty Care Fact Sheet and Checklist

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