

Module 2:

Understanding psychosis



This module will:

- explain what psychosis is
- explain what a diagnosis is and how it can help you and
- help you think about recovering from psychosis

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Plan for today's session

How was your week?

What would you like to talk about today?

Evaluating today's session

Summary of what we talked about today

What will I do during the week?

How was today for me?

Name: _____ Date: _____



What is psychosis?

When someone experiences psychosis, it means they aren't sure what is real and unreal. Our thinking changes. You can have odd or out of the ordinary experiences.

Here are some common experiences that people have when they experience psychosis.

- **Hearing voices**

Hearing voices and other hallucinations such as seeing, tasting, smelling or feeling things that other people do not experience, are part of psychosis.

- **Having strong beliefs that other people do not share**

Strong beliefs that others do not share are part of psychosis.

For example, someone experiencing psychosis might believe there is a government conspiracy against them or that their mind is being controlled by someone else. Beliefs like these are called delusions.

There are many different kinds of delusions. Sometimes delusions are about other people harming you or can be a strong belief about you being special or chosen.

- **Difficulty thinking and concentrating**

If you aren't sure what is real and unreal, it is difficult to think and concentrate on what is happening around you. You may talk back to the voices you hear, or you may talk to others in a way that they can't follow. These sort of problems are called thought disorder.

- **Lack of motivation**

If hallucinations and strong beliefs are taking all your attention, it is difficult to be motivated. You might not have the energy to prepare food or look after yourself.

Who can experience psychosis?

Many people will have brief experiences of psychosis in their lives. This can be caused by severe stress such as the death of a close friend or family member or a lack of sleep.

Is psychosis the same for everyone?

No, everyone experiences psychosis differently. Some people experience psychosis only once. Others have a few episodes, especially during stressful times. Some people have regular experiences of psychosis.

Sometimes distressing thoughts or ways of thinking can be helpful. For example, in times of danger suspicious thinking can help protect us.

Also, experiences such as hearing voices may not be distressing for some people. For some people, voices are neutral, pleasant or helpful. In general, people who have helpful voices are less likely to use mental health services.

Some people find voices and other experiences of psychosis distressing, but they develop ways to cope without using mental health services.

And some people find experiences of psychosis distressing or very distressing. Mental health services are available to help people cope and recover.

Experiences of psychosis: personal stories²

Rachel's story

“There’s just this incredible rush of energy”

“It’s like the whole of the top of your head comes off. There’s just this incredible rush of energy and, and hysteria almost. And, then I started to hallucinate visually, and I just saw this lovely garden, and I thought “oh this is heaven”. And, by that point I was completely lost because then I had an alternative to that, and I really believed I was going to hell. I thought I was dying ... I’m not desperately religious. And I woke up and Mum came into the room, and I was completely gone. And we were kind of left to deal with it for a couple of days.

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² These stories come from **Understanding Psychosis and Schizophrenia** (BPS, 2014, pg. 11). Reproduced with permission of the licensor through PLS clear.



I didn't understand what had happened to me. I really thought I was dying. So I picked up a Bible [laughter in voice] and read 'Revelations' which is not a very good thing to do. And for two minutes I actually believed that I was Christ, until I was logical enough to think, well I'm not male, so what's happening?"

Graham's story³

"I didn't know what to do with it"

"I began to think that ... my blood had been poisoned by evil spirits and that I was evil, and that there were spirits around me, warping my thoughts and changing my thoughts, and that was very frightening and I didn't know what to do with it."



Miriam's story

"I become paranoid about everything"

"I was diagnosed with a mental illness five years ago. I'm on tablets to suppress paranoia and voices. These work except that sometimes I still experience paranoia. It's the worst feeling I've ever felt, and it comes on during the middle of the day and lasts till I go to sleep at night. I become paranoid about everything – that my keys are going to drop out of my bag; that my trousers are going to fall down; that the authorities will want to test me to see if I am really ill. I fear exposing myself in front of others, or saying something rude. I get mental pictures of me doing nasty things or them doing nasty things to me and yet something else is happening in reality ... I would do anything to stop these feelings as all I want to do is run from everyone when I have them."



3 Footnote These stories come from **Understanding Psychosis and Schizophrenia** (BPS, 2014, pg. 11 & 12). Reproduced with permission of the licensor through PLS clear.

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What is my experience?

Worksheet

Do I see, hear or experience things that others don't?

Do I have some beliefs that others don't share?

How is my concentration and ability to think?

Am I managing to do the things I want?

How do I tend to manage stress in my life?

Do I get enough sleep? Do I get too little or too much?

How is my mood in general?

Name: _____ Date: _____

What causes psychosis?

These are the main causes of psychosis.

- Stress such as a death or a lack of sleep
- Stress related to trauma, death of a loved one, lack of sleep, job loss, recent changes
- Strong emotions such as anxiety, fear, despair and depression
- Drug or alcohol use and abuse
- Other psychological conditions

Are there different types of psychosis?

Yes, there are different types of psychosis. When you attend mental health services and get a **diagnosis**, you will probably hear one of these terms.

Schizophrenia

When people talk about psychosis, they are most often talking about schizophrenia. If you experience psychosis for more than 6 months, you will be given this diagnosis. If you have experienced psychosis for less than 6 months, you may be diagnosed with schizophreniform psychosis.

Schizo-affective disorder

If you experience psychosis and symptoms of a mood disorder such as depression or mania at the same time, you will be diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder.

Drug-induced psychosis

Sometimes drug or alcohol use can trigger a psychotic episode. This kind of psychotic episode is usually short, but for some people it can last longer. Because of this difference, it can sometimes be hard to work out a person's diagnosis right away.

Bipolar disorder

Psychosis can also be part of bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder – which you may know as manic depression – is a condition that affects your moods, which can swing from one extreme to another. If you have bipolar disorder, you will have periods or 'episodes' of depression and mania, usually lasting many weeks.

Organic psychosis

Injury or illness can also cause psychotic experiences. Some illnesses that can affect the brain this way are long-term alcoholism, Alzheimer’s disease and encephalitis (swelling of the brain tissue).

Trauma and psychosis

Trauma, particularly early in life, can cause post-traumatic stress disorder and psychosis. Low mood and intrusive traumatic memories can distort how you interpret your environment.

Why should I have a diagnosis?

A diagnosis is simply a way of identifying your problems that helps a doctor decide how to treat you.

Some people do not agree with or like the diagnosis they get. It is important to remember that you are not your diagnosis. You are a person who has hopes and dreams. You have a unique pattern of experiences.

Your doctor will use your diagnosis to try to help you, but there are many things you can do to help yourself too.

Experiences of diagnosis: personal stories⁴

Karin’s story

“people live through my illness”

“I think I prefer my illness having a name because it makes me feel less lonely, and I know that there are other people experiencing my kind of misery. And that people live through my illness and make a meaningful existence with it. But I also have to be careful not to adopt the sick role, since I know I would just give up if I did that.”

- Karen Falk



4 Understanding Psychosis and Schizophrenia (BPS, 2014, pg. 25). Reproduced with permission of the licensor through PLS clear.

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Laura's story⁵

“have a holistic approach which would offer more”

“There is a point where it becomes what we call an illness – we don't function properly and we are experiencing very unusual things and reacting very unusually ... The problem lies ... in what we attach to the ideas of illness. If the concept of illness was extended from biology to include our emotional/ spiritual/thinking and meaning-making faculties, we would have a holistic approach which would offer more.”

- Laura Lee



Terry's story

“the start of my path to wellness”

“When someone confronts you with the line ‘you're ill’, it's easy to reject it out of hand and dismiss it totally. But denial can be extremely damaging. I see my first six years in the system as being in limbo. Acceptance of my illness was a turning point – the start of my path to wellness. It is important to understand that denial of the illness can be a natural reaction and a normal defence mechanism to a very painful truth. ... for me, denial was my way of coping, of staying normal ... The trouble with not accepting is that you also reject treatment. You refuse medication, fight confinement and rebel, or worse – turn on those trying to help you. This behaviour gets you nowhere, and just makes things worse. By accepting treatment I could actively seek the right medication, access support, and turn my life around.”

- Terry Bowyer



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5 Understanding Psychosis and Schizophrenia (BPS, 2014, pg. 25).
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Can people recover from psychotic experiences?

Yes, it is possible to get better and recover from psychotic experiences.

Remember that many people who hear voices or see visions are not distressed by them. They never need help from mental health services.

For people who do have distressing psychotic experiences and need help, recovery is possible. Around half will have one experience and never have another one.

For people who have lasting difficulties, mental health services are available. In these cases, studies show that the best approach is medication and therapy. Attending mental health services can help people with ongoing psychosis to manage their experiences successfully.

Experiences of recovery: personal stories⁶

“many people hear voices and live well”

“I work four days a week in a professional job; I own my own house and live happily with my partner and pets. Occasionally I hear voices – for example when I have been particularly stressed or tired, or I have seen visions after a bereavement. Knowing that many people hear voices and live well, and that some cultures see these experiences as a gift, helps me to never catastrophise or to worry that it may be the start of a breakdown. Although I am lucky that the experiences have never been as upsetting as some people’s, if someone had told me it was madness I could have got into a vicious cycle and struggled to get out.”

- Sara

6 Understanding Psychosis and Schizophrenia (BPS, 2014, pg. 29). Reproduced with permission of the licensor through PLS clear. .

What will help me recover?

A lot of research about recovering from psychosis looks at how people get better (recover) and what helps them. These are the key points that researchers have discovered.

- If you work, you are more likely to recover, especially if:
 - you choose the work you do
 - the work uses your skills
 - your work is valued by others
 - you have some control over your work.
- People are more likely to recover when the economy is strong and less likely to recover when the economy is weak.
- In countries with a big gap between rich and poor, people are less likely to recover.
- If you take your medicine and go to therapy, you are more likely to recover and less likely to relapse (have another psychotic experience).
- If you have supportive relationships, you are more likely to do well. People do less well if their family members or partners are very critical or protect them too much.

Five important things to help you recover:

1. Connect with the world outside yourself – go out and participate
2. Look for supportive relationships
3. Cultivate hope
4. Develop a positive identity – you're more than a patient, find meaning in life
5. Learn how to empower yourself – find out what helps you most and use this knowledge to manage your experiences

Recovering means making some changes. You've seen some of the things that can help you recover, and some of these are things you can do yourself or with the help of your friends, family and mental health team.

Use the worksheet [Starting to Recover](#) to think about what is going on for you now. Think about what is negative and positive, and think about how changing it will help you and what is difficult about changing.

Use the worksheet [How Can I Work towards My Recovery?](#) to think about the five important things to help you recover. You will probably be able to think of something you already do or know that helps you.

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Starting to Recover

What is my problem right now?

What is negative about my problem?

What is positive about my problem?

What will be good about changing?

What will be difficult about changing?

Name: _____ Date: _____

How can I work towards my recovery?

How do I connect to the world outside myself?

How do I cultivate hope?

What is positive about myself? What makes me more than a patient?

What meaning can I find in life?

How do I empower myself? What helps me?

Name: _____ Date: _____