

## WHAT IS PSYCHOSIS?

Psychosis is a serious but treatable mental condition that is caused by a disturbance in brain functioning. A person with psychosis experiences a loss of contact with reality, characterized by changes in their thoughts, beliefs, perceptions and/or behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

Hallucinations and delusions are often referred to as *positive* signs of psychosis, as they reflect behaviour rooted in the disordered thinking, beliefs and perceptions. Social withdrawal, apathy and emotional "flatness", on the other hand, are referred to as *negative* signs of psychosis. They are referred to as "negative" because they are the result of the disease taking things away from the person, such as social or communication skills.<sup>2</sup>

The different types of symptoms can overlap and different people may experience different symptoms or combination of symptoms. In general, the symptoms of schizophrenia can be divided into four broad categories.

## TREATMENT

It is important to treat psychosis as quickly as possible,<sup>4</sup> and a class of drugs known as antipsychotics is an essential part of this treatment.<sup>4</sup> There are several antipsychotic medications, and the type of medication and the dose prescribed will vary from person to person, depending upon patient factors, whether this is a first or recurrent episode, and the phase of the disease.<sup>4</sup> The decision as to what medication will be used should be made in consultation with the patients.<sup>4</sup> Psychosocial therapy is an equally important part of treating schizophrenia,<sup>4</sup> and typically begins once the acute phase has passed and symptoms begin to wane.<sup>4,5</sup>

## RESOURCES & MORE INFORMATION

Psychosis. Canadian Mental Health Association. Available at [http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content\\_page.asp?cid=3-105\\_8/07/2008](http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3-105_8/07/2008)

What is Schizophrenia? An Information Guide. Available from the Schizophrenia Society of Canada website, [http://www.schizophrenia.ca/files/What\\_Is\\_Schizophrenia.pdf](http://www.schizophrenia.ca/files/What_Is_Schizophrenia.pdf) 8/07/2008

Learning about Schizophrenia: Rays of Hope. Third Revised Edition. Schizophrenia Society of Canada, 2003. Available from the Schizophrenia Society of Canada website, [http://www.schizophrenia.ca/files/Rays\\_of\\_Hope.pdf](http://www.schizophrenia.ca/files/Rays_of_Hope.pdf) 27/06/2008

What is psychosis? Fraser Health Early Psychosis Intervention. [www.psychosissucks.ca/epi/whatispsychosis.cfm](http://www.psychosissucks.ca/epi/whatispsychosis.cfm). 8/08/2008

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Source: Psychosis. Canadian Mental Health Association. Available at [http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content\\_page.asp?cid=3-105\\_8/07/2008](http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3-105_8/07/2008). "Psychosis is a serious but treatable medical condition that reflects a disturbance in brain functioning. A person with psychosis experiences some loss of contact with reality, characterized by changes in their way of thinking, believing, perceiving and/or behaving."
- <sup>2</sup> Source: Learning about Schizophrenia: Rays of Hope. Third Revised Edition. Schizophrenia Society of Canada, 2003. Available from the Schizophrenia Society of Canada website, [http://www.schizophrenia.ca/files/Rays\\_of\\_Hope.pdf](http://www.schizophrenia.ca/files/Rays_of_Hope.pdf) 27/06/2008
- <sup>3</sup> Source for Acute and Recovery Phase: Source: What is psychosis? Fraser Health Early Psychosis Intervention. [www.psychosissucks.ca/epi/whatispsychosis.cfm](http://www.psychosissucks.ca/epi/whatispsychosis.cfm). 8/08/2008
- <sup>4</sup> III Pharmacotherapy IN Clinical practice guidelines, Treatment of schizophrenia. Can J Psychiatry 2005;13(Suppl 1): 19S-28S.
- <sup>5</sup> IV Psychosocial Interventions IN Clinical practice guidelines, Treatment of schizophrenia. Can J Psychiatry 2005;13(Suppl 1): 29S-36S

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Symptoms of  
Psychosis &  
Schizophrenia

# SYMPTOMS OF PSYCHOSIS

## POSITIVE SYMPTOMS

- ❖ **Hallucinations or sensing things that aren't really there:** the most common form of hallucinations is hearing voices but hallucinations can also involve seeing, smelling or tasting things that others don't perceive.
- ❖ **Delusions or strange beliefs that don't make sense to other people or which reasoning or evidence shows can't be true:** Delusions are beliefs that are maintained despite obvious evidence to the contrary. People with schizophrenia who have delusions that they are being spied on, plotted against, harmed or tormented are described as "paranoid".
- ❖ **Agitation, grandiosity, hostility or suspiciousness:** In some cases, the person may become emotionally disturbed or excited, restless or hyperactive. There may be the belief that he or she possess special powers, are wealthy, famous or highly intelligent. In other cases, the person may become hostile, acting in an abusive, sarcastic or difficult manner, or very suspicious of others.

## NEGATIVE SYMPTOMS

- ❖ **Social withdrawal and loss of interest in everyday activities:** the person may avoid contact with others and spend more and more time alone. They may stop doing even simple things such as eating, activities with family or friends, taking care of personal hygiene, cooking, reading or watching TV.
- ❖ **Lack of energy:** the person may sleep for long periods. Even when awake, speech, movement and actions may seem unnatural, slow and to lack spontaneity.
- ❖ **Poor communications with others:** the person may try to avoid talking with others. In conversation, he or she may appear bored, uninterested or cold, avoid eye contact, speak in a monotonous voice and have few facial expressions. Typically, they won't speak unless spoken to directly.

## COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS OR CHANGES IN THINKING

- ❖ **Poor concentration:** The person may be unable to focus on one thought for very long. Thoughts may race and come and go quickly.
- ❖ **Thought disorder:** The person may be absorbed in his or her own thoughts or perceptions, unable to connect thoughts into logical sequences or have trouble thinking abstractly or understanding the underlying meaning of things. Thoughts may become "blocked" or "fragmented," making it difficult to communicate ideas to others, or repetitive, grandiose and unyielding.

## EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

- ❖ **Blunted emotions:** The person may not feel connected emotionally to what is going on around him or her. Or, the person may not be able to express or communicate outwardly what he or she is feeling.
- ❖ **Depression:** Depression involves feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. The future may appear bleak and there may be talk of, or attempts at, suicide.

## EARLY SIGNS<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the onset of a period of psychosis, the following symptoms are commonly observed:

- ❖ Social withdrawal, isolation and becoming suspicious of others
- ❖ Inability to either express joy or to cry or, conversely inappropriate laughter or excessive crying
- ❖ Flat, expressionless gaze
- ❖ Poor personal hygiene
- ❖ Excess fatigue and sleepiness or an inability to sleep (insomnia)

Other changes may occur in the person's behaviour, work or studies, interactions with others or beliefs. Family members and loved ones should seek medical attention if they notice unusual or unexplained changes in behaviour that persist over a few weeks.

## ACUTE & RECOVERY PHASES<sup>3</sup>

During the acute phase of a psychotic episode, the positive and negative symptoms of psychosis, along with the cognitive and emotional symptoms, become more intense, active and continuous. They interfere with normal life and are typically hard to miss. Immediate medical care is essential. Some of the symptoms that occurred in the acute phase may linger.