

# INTRO TO FIRST EPISODE PSYCHOSIS

Most individuals that experience **psychosis** have their **first episode** between ages **16 to 30**,<sup>1</sup> with the **average age of onset** being **24**.<sup>2</sup> The average age of onset tends to be in the late teens to the early 20s for men, and in the late 20s to early 30s for women. Due to **emerging adults** being part this age group, it is important for them to get help when first experiencing **psychosis**. It commonly occurs at a **critical stage in their life** when they are embarking on education goals, a future career, and developing meaningful relationships with others.

## First Episode Psychosis

**Early psychosis**, also known as **First Episode Psychosis (FEP)**, refers to the initial time that a person starts to have **psychotic** symptoms. Specifically, they may experience **hallucinations** and/or **delusions**, causing them to question reality. The term "**psychotic episode**" refers to the **duration of time** when symptoms are present and interfere with an individual's daily life.

During **FEP** it is critical to connect the **emerging adult** to the treatment they need. The quicker an **emerging adult** can access services, the likelier they are to have better outcomes and recovery.

To understand FEP, we must first define psychosis. We provide one from the **National Institute of Mental Health**.<sup>3</sup>

“**Psychosis** refers to a **collection** of **symptoms** that affect the mind, where there has been some **loss** of **contact** with **reality**. During an episode of **psychosis**, a person's **thoughts** and **perceptions** are **disrupted** and they may have difficulty recognizing what is real and what is not.

— **National Institute of Mental Health**

# WHAT IS PSYCHOSIS?

**Psychosis** can express itself in a variety of ways, but commonly it includes one of the two experiences: **hallucinations** and **delusions**.<sup>4</sup> To the **emerging adult**, experiencing these can be very real, which causes many to feel scared and confused.

## HALLUCINATIONS

"Seeing, hearing, or feeling things that aren't there."

- Hearing **voices**
- Feeling abnormal **sensations**
- Believing that they are **seeing things** or **people** that are not there or are distorted

## DELUSIONS

"Strong beliefs that are not consistent with the person's culture, are unlikely to be true and may seem irrational to others."

- Believing that **external forces** are controlling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
- Common remarks, events, or objects have **personal meaning** or significance
- Belief they have **special powers**, a **special mission** they have to fulfill, or that they are a **higher being**

Anyone can experience **psychosis**, but everyone's experience is different and unique to them. Currently in the United States,

~3%

of people experience at least **one psychotic episode** during their lives<sup>5</sup>

~100,000

teens each year experience their **first psychotic episode**<sup>6</sup>

24

is the **average age of psychosis onset**<sup>7</sup>

# RISK FACTORS FOR PSYCHOSIS

There is no singular cause for **psychosis**. It can be a result any combination of the following risk factors:<sup>8</sup>

## Family History (genetics)

## Psychological or Physical Trauma

These include stressors during critical stages of brain development, such as: death of a person in an **emerging adult's** life, sexual assault/abuse.

## Mental Illness

**Psychosis** can also be a symptom of a serious mental health condition such as schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, and schizoaffective disorder.

## Physical Illness

Traumatic brain injuries, brain tumors, strokes, HIV, and brain diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and dementia can result in psychosis.

## Sleep Deprivation

First symptoms of **psychosis** can occur within 24 to 48 hours of not sleeping.<sup>9</sup>

## Substance Use

Marijuana, hallucinogens, and stimulant medications.

## Being a Young Adult

Although **psychosis** can begin at any age due to the hormonal changes in the brain during this specific period of their life they are at an increased risk.

## Giving Birth

Individuals who give birth are at a higher risk for developing postpartum **psychosis** – symptoms of psychosis usually start quickly within the first 2 weeks after giving birth (most often within hours or days of giving birth).<sup>10</sup>

# EARLY SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Signs and symptoms of **psychosis** can vary in intensity and duration. A psychotic episode can last hours, days, weeks, months, and even years. Many times **families** and **friends** are the **first to notice** and recognize early signs of **psychosis**. Below are the **four overarching domains** that **psychosis signs & symptoms** fit within to look for changes in, with specific signs & symptoms<sup>11</sup> under each domain on the next page.

Perception,  
thinking,  
and speech

Social

Emotional

Behavioral

These signs can occur in children as young as **eight**. There are **screening tools** that can detect individuals that have a higher risk, such as this one here:

## **Psychosis & Schizophrenia Test**<sup>12</sup>

<https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/psychosis/>

# EARLY SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

## Perception, thinking, and speech



- Irrational statements
- Memory problems
- Severe distractibility
- Reduced speech/talking
- Rapid speech that is difficult to interrupt
- They report that things around them seem changed in some way
- Peculiar use of words, odd language structures, or speaking more vaguely than usual
- Unusual sensitivity to stimuli (noise, light, colors, textures)
- Preoccupation with new religion and spiritual practices (not part of their normal engagement)

## Social



- Severe decline of social relationships
- Dropping out of activities - or less engagement in their life
- Social withdrawal, isolation, reclusiveness
- Unexpected aggression
- Extreme suspiciousness and paranoid thoughts about other people
- No longer seems to "read" social situations or interactions

## Behavioral



- Inappropriate laughter
- Inability to cry, or excessive crying
- Personality changes
- Odd or bizarre behavior
- Feeling refreshed after much less sleep than normal
- Excessive writing that is difficult to understand
- Deterioration of personal hygiene
- Hyperactivity or inactivity, or alternating between the two
- Staring without blinking - or blinking incessantly
- Severe sleep disturbances
- Drug or alcohol use (which may be a coping mechanism)
- Out of character reckless behaviors
- Strange posturing or gesturing
- Significantly decreased activity
- Difficulties functioning at school or work

## Emotional



- General personality changes
- Agitation
- Feelings of depression and anxiety
- Inability to express joy
- Euphoric (elated) mood

# STARTING THE CONVERSATION

If you are a professional that notices, or hears from a parent or other trusted adult they have noticed, an **emerging adult** showing signs and/or symptoms of **psychosis**, here are some tips and conversation starters<sup>13</sup> to ease into the topic:

## Tip

**Educate** yourself on **psychosis**

Go into a conversation with an **open-mind** without any expectations or outcomes of the conversation

Choose a **location** that is **quiet** and provides no distractions

**Do not argue** with the emerging adult, and be an active listener

Assure them that they are **not alone**

Provide **hope**

## Conversation Starters

“ You don't seem like yourself. ”

“ I care about you and am here to talk if you want. ”

“ We can get through anything together, no matter how scary. ”

“ You won't always feel this way, it is temporary. ”