

INTRO TO FIRST EPISODE PSYCHOSIS

Most individuals that experience **psychosis** have their **first episode** between ages **16 to 30**,¹ with the **average age of onset** being **24**.² 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**.³

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**.⁴ 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 lives⁵

~100,000

teens each year experience their **first psychotic episode**⁶

24

is the **average age of psychosis onset**⁷

RISK FACTORS FOR PSYCHOSIS

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

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.⁹

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).¹⁰

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 & symptoms¹¹ 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 Test¹²

<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 starters¹³ 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. ”