

## FEAT FACTSHEET

# Understanding Psychotic Experiences

### What are psychotic experiences?

This is a psychiatric term, and describes experiences, such as hearing or seeing things or holding unusual beliefs, which other people don't see or share. During a psychotic experience, your thoughts may jump around very quickly, and so you may find it difficult to voice them in a way that others can understand. For many people, these experiences can be highly distressing and disruptive, interfering with everyday life, with making friends, having relationships, and finding or keeping a job.

Depending on other factors, psychiatrists will base a diagnosis on symptoms of this kind. The diagnosis could be severe depression, schizophrenia, manic depression (bipolar disorder), paranoia, psychotic illness, schizoaffective disorder, or puerperal psychosis (a very severe postnatal depression). These diagnoses are not clear-cut, and people may receive different diagnoses at different times.

One sign of psychosis, as far as psychiatrists are concerned, is if you lack insight into your own state of mind. They would want to know how you see and understand what is happening, and whether you are aware of being different from usual. If you are experiencing psychosis, you may find it hard to talk about your experiences and understanding of the world, because you feel no words can describe how you feel and think. A large number of ordinary people have heard voices in the normal course of life, particularly during periods of stress or loss, such as a bereavement, divorce and separation. Many people also hold beliefs that others might consider unusual. Because the experiences don't distress them, or don't return, they are never in contact with mental health services.

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## **What sort of experiences are they?**

Everyone's experiences are unique. The majority hear voices, but others experience non-verbal thoughts, images and visions, tastes, smells and sensations, which have no apparent cause. For example, feeling as if insects were crawling under your skin, having a sensation like an electric shock, or smelling something that other people around you can't. These are called hallucinations, although many regard the term as misleading, because of the implication that the experiences are not real.

What seems to be important is how you react to these experiences. Some people take them in their stride; others feel overwhelmed by them. You may feel ashamed and afraid that you are going mad. You may not realise how common the experience is.

### **Hearing voices**

The voices may be recognisable or unfamiliar. There may be one or many of them, talking to, or about, you. They might be present occasionally, or all the time, interfering with ordinary life, making concentration and conversation difficult.

The voices may be benign and helpful, or hostile and nasty. Some people hear only positive voices, and may not regard them as a problem. They may even feel them to be a helpful, guiding light. Others hear only negative voices, ridiculing and belittling them, which cause them great distress and which they feel they have to fight. They may feel the voices are in control of their body and can hurt them. This may be responsible for them cutting themselves and other behaviour.

### **Unfounded beliefs**

A delusion means holding an unshakeable belief that other people would regard as groundless. For example, the delusion could be the belief that they are closely related to the Queen, although they share no relatives. The person may be quite untroubled by any apparent contradictions. They may see nothing unusual in a member of the royal family serving drinks in a pub, for instance. To qualify as a delusion, many people would argue that the belief has to be quite out of keeping with the person's culture and family background. So, if someone believes in curses and comes from a background that accepts witchcraft as a fact of life, their belief should not be regarded as a delusion. However, not all medical professionals would agree with this distinction.

Some delusional ideas can be extremely frightening and these are known as paranoid delusions. The person may feel quite powerless in their grip. They may start avoiding certain situations, or try to protect themselves in some way. They may believe they deserve to be punished, or feel very angry and resentful. Sometimes, people also have delusions of grandeur, thinking they are very rich and powerful, perhaps controlling the stock markets or even the weather. This could be a way of coping with feelings of low self-esteem and powerlessness.

## What causes them?

Almost anyone can have a brief psychotic episode. It may result from a lack of sleep (through severe jet lag, perhaps), through illnesses and high fevers (including malaria, pneumonia, 'flu and other viral infections) or abusing alcohol or drugs (street drugs, and prescription medication, including steroids).

There are different ideas about why psychotic experiences become a problem. But it's generally thought that some people are more vulnerable to them, and that very stressful or traumatic events make them more likely to occur. A person's own attitude to their experience, as well as the attitude of those around them, also plays a part.

The experiences involve biological changes in brain structure or brain chemistry, but whether these are the cause or the effect of the psychotic experience is impossible to say. Research into whether there's an inherited vulnerability is inconclusive. If one member of a family is diagnosed with schizophrenia or manic depression, then there seems to be more chance of another family member being similarly diagnosed. But no single gene has been found to be responsible. Early experiences in life may be important in helping to prevent, or contributing to, problems.

All our experiences colour the way we interpret what happens to us in life. Many people who have psychotic experiences seem to have been physically, emotionally or sexually abused. Their experience of life can make them anxious and suspicious about other people, as well as lowering their self-esteem. So, if they have a psychotic experience, it may be particularly frightening and disturbing to them. This sets up a vicious, negative circle. It may interfere with sleep and daily life, and make it very hard to trust anyone.

People who have been through very difficult or unhappy events may need to push their feelings and memories away, because they are so painful. Some therapists suggest that psychotic experiences are an expression of these overwhelming feelings and forbidden thoughts. In other words, these are a way of coping with life events, such as abuse.

It's also been suggested that they are traits we all share, to varying degrees, but which are interpreted differently, according to our culture or social standing. Someone regarded as 'charmingly eccentric' in an artistic community, may be condemned as 'abnormal' elsewhere.

## Will I get over it?

The majority of those who have one psychotic episode never have another one. Others may be prone to fairly short-lived episodes throughout their lives. Some may live with ongoing psychosis as a long-term problem. However serious the difficulties, there are treatments and coping strategies that reduce the disruption and enable people to lead fulfilling lives and to achieve their ambitions.

## What sort of treatment can I get?

Many mental health workers and other professionals now look at people's problems as a whole, within their environment, and give them information and choice about treatment. It's increasingly recognised that many people are experts in their own condition.

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**Medication:** Most people diagnosed with a psychotic illness will be offered antipsychotic medication (major tranquillisers or neuroleptics). Medical staff should help people explore whether medication is helpful and, if so, which drug, at which dose, and whether to take it regularly, as a preventive, or only under certain circumstances.

**Talking treatments:** Talking treatments, including counselling, psychodynamic psychotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, can reduce distress and the intensity and frequency of the experiences. They can help to tackle depression and anxiety that may result from having psychotic experiences. However, these treatments should be discussed initially with medical staff.

**Family therapy:** This can strengthen the family and enable them to identify what is helpful and what is unhelpful for individual members. This helps people with a psychotic condition to maintain their mental health, as well as providing support for all family members in a crisis.

**Hospital admission:** If you become very distressed during an episode of psychosis, you may be admitted to hospital, either as a voluntary patient or under the terms of the Mental Health Act 1983. This gives medical staff a chance to assess your needs and decide how to help.

Being given a diagnosis can be a great relief if you have been feeling overwhelmed by your experiences. There are many support groups and coping strategies available and medical staff will be able to offer further information and advice about these.

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