

# When a parent or caregiver has experienced psychosis

*Answers for kids*

YOU MIGHT HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS WHEN someone in your family is sick. If your parent or caregiver has psychosis, you may feel like no one wants to talk about it. And all the information online can feel scary or overwhelming. Talking about psychosis can be hard, but it's important to be open and honest about mental health.

In this pamphlet, we'll try to answer your questions. We'll also give you some places where you can talk to someone or read more about psychosis.

## What is psychosis?

- Psychosis is a loss of contact with reality. People with psychosis have trouble telling the difference between what is real and what is not. When this happens, it is called a “psychotic episode.”
- Our bodies have chemicals, hormones and other elements that need to be in balance to keep us healthy. When things get out of balance, people can develop illnesses that affect the body, like diabetes, or illnesses that affect the mind, like psychosis.

## What causes psychosis?

- It's unclear why, but some people get psychosis and others don't. Scientists are doing research to understand more about psychosis.
- You are not the cause of your parent or caregiver's psychosis and nothing you did led them to experience it.
- There are many possible causes of psychosis:
  - other mental illnesses, like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, major depression or posttraumatic stress disorder
  - other medical illnesses, like Alzheimer's disease or Parkinson's disease
  - an injury, life crisis or stress
  - using certain drugs.
- Psychosis can start suddenly, or it can develop slowly over time.
- Many people who experience the things that can cause psychosis do not develop it.
- Sometimes the causes are not known. The cause in one person can be different from the cause in someone else.

## How does psychosis feel?

- A person with psychosis has difficulties with perception, or the way they understand things:
  - They may feel and look confused. They may not be able to hear what someone is asking or telling them.
  - They may hear voices or see things that aren't really there, or that other people can't hear or see. These are called “hallucinations.”
- The person may have thoughts and beliefs that other people find strange. These are called “delusions.” For example, they may believe that someone is following them. This is called a “paranoid delusion.”
- Sometimes the person may say things that are scary or make up an unbelievable story. They may say things that don't seem to make sense.

- The person may have difficulties expressing their feelings. This means they may not show their feelings to you (for example, they may give fewer hugs or not say “I love you”). They may even say mean things. This can be scary and painful. But it is not your fault.
- These are all common symptoms of psychosis, but a person may not have all of these symptoms.
- Some people have only a few symptoms and are still able to do everything they usually do. Other people need a period of rest where they focus on getting better.

## Can psychosis be fixed?

- Yes. The good news is that psychosis is treatable.
- For most people who get treatment, the thoughts, feelings and behaviours caused by psychosis gradually go away. For some people this happens quickly, and for others it takes longer. Others learn how to live with psychosis.

## Will psychosis always come back?

- Sometimes symptoms of psychosis stay for a long time or come back after disappearing. If this happens, the person can get treatment again.
- Some people have only one psychotic episode in their lifetime. Others have many episodes over a long period.

## How can my parent or caregiver get better?

- A person may have strong symptoms the first time they experience psychosis. This can be very confusing and frightening, both for them and for their family.
- Doctors, nurses and other health care workers will provide treatment that has helped other people with psychosis.
- Common treatments are medicine and talk therapy:
  - Medicines help the chemicals in the brain get back into balance. Then, the person will start to feel like themselves again.
  - Talk therapy focuses on the feelings of the person experiencing psychosis. A therapist helps the person learn about their illness and find healthy ways to cope.
  - Therapy may also help your parent or caregiver live with psychosis so that they can still do the things that are important to them, like take care of you, manage their money, do what makes them happy and stay healthy.

### **Is there anything I can do to make my parent or caregiver better?**

- Family support is really important, but adults, not you, are responsible for helping your parent or caregiver with psychosis.
- Sometimes it will help your parent or caregiver just to know that you are there. You can do small things to show you care, like giving them a card or photo or talking to them on the phone.
- You can also ask other adults in the family or the health care workers caring for your parent or caregiver if there's anything more you can do to show support.

### **Will I get psychosis too?**

- Psychosis is a mental illness or symptom—it's not something you can "catch" from someone else, like a cold.
- Psychosis is rare, but no one can know for sure if they will experience it at some point in life.
- It's natural to worry about this. Psychosis is like other illnesses—if there is psychosis in your family, you might be at greater risk yourself. But there is a much bigger chance that you will not develop psychosis.

### **What if my parent or caregiver has to go to the hospital?**

- Sometimes people need to go to the hospital when their symptoms become overwhelming or make it hard to take care of themselves or others.
- If your parent or caregiver goes, people at the hospital will make sure they get the help they need. They will have a room where they can rest and focus on getting better.
- You may or may not be able to visit your parent or caregiver. If not, work with another adult to find ways to connect.
- It is okay to ask questions about what is happening with your parent or caregiver. You have a right to get answers to your questions.

### **What if my parent or caregiver is too sick to look after me?**

- If your parent or caregiver is unable to look after you, tell an adult you trust, such as another family member, or a doctor or teacher. You deserve to be taken care of and treated well.

- If you are worried about this happening in the future, you can talk with another adult to make a plan in case your parent or caregiver needs to go to the hospital or needs to focus on getting better before they can take care of you again.
- It may feel scary or upsetting to have so much of your life change while your parent or caregiver is sick, especially if you need to leave home and stay somewhere else for a while. It may help to keep up with things that make you feel like yourself, such as spending time with friends, playing sports or doing hobbies.
- It may be difficult to be without your parent or caregiver, but this time apart will allow you to be together and healthy again.

### **What do I tell other people?**

- A lot of people find it hard to talk about mental health. This may include your family and friends. Usually, as people learn more about mental health, they begin to feel more comfortable discussing it.
- Some of your close friends may be able to talk with you about your feelings. You can also talk to an adult you trust, like a family member, therapist, teacher or doctor. Sometimes having another adult there while you talk to a friend can make the conversation easier.
- A trusted adult can also help you find a way to explain the situation to other kids who may ask what is wrong with your parent. You may want to say:
  - "My mom is sick and needs to be in hospital so she can get better."
  - "When my dad gets sick, it affects what he says and how he acts."
- You don't have to share any details that you don't want to. If you feel uncomfortable, you can stop a conversation. Try saying, "Thanks for asking, but I don't want to talk about this anymore."
- Some people do not understand psychosis or other mental illnesses, so they make jokes or mean comments. You can leave these conversations. Talk with an adult about your feelings, and if you need to, get a teacher or another adult involved. **You and your parent or caregiver deserve to be treated with respect.**

### How can I cope with my feelings?

- You may have a lot of complicated feelings and need help sorting through them all. Talking, doing fun activities, calling a helpline or even seeing a doctor or therapist can make those feelings easier to deal with.
- Your parent or caregiver may not be able to talk with you about your feelings. If that happens, talk with another adult. This could be another family member, a teacher, a friend's parent or your doctor. You may prefer to reach out to a religious leader or elder depending on your culture or community. It's healthy to share your feelings with others.

### What can I do if I'm scared?

- It can help to make an action plan with your parents or caregivers or other trusted adults. Then, when you are scared, you have a plan to follow. It is a good way to get help for you or your parent or caregiver with psychosis.
- Action plans can include:
  - the name and number of an adult you can call
  - other numbers to call if your parent or caregiver needs medical support, such as their doctor or an emergency line
  - a safe place or activity you can do
  - specific steps to take in an emergency.
- If you need someone to talk to, contact Kids Help Phone (see "Need someone to talk to?").
- If there is an emergency, call 9-1-1.
- If you think your parent or caregiver is at risk of hurting themselves, call the 9-8-8 suicide crisis helpline.

### Need someone to talk to?

#### Kids Help Phone

1 800 668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868. Or visit [kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca)

#### Canada's 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling or texting 9-8-8 anywhere in Canada.

[988.ca](http://988.ca)

### Other resources

#### Kids Help Phone

#### "My Fill-in-the-Blanks Safety Plan"

Visit [kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca)

#### Schizophrenia Society of Canada

[schizophrenia.ca](http://schizophrenia.ca)

#### Hope + Me (Mood Disorders Association of Ontario)

Toll-free: 1 888 486-8236

Toronto: 416 486-8046

[info@hopeandme.ca](mailto:info@hopeandme.ca)

[hopeandme.org](http://hopeandme.org)

### Also available from CAMH

#### *Early Psychosis: An Information Guide*

This guide outlines the causes, symptoms and treatment of psychosis and the course of recovery. You can find this guide in CAMH's online stores (see next page).

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, or to download a copy of this pamphlet, visit our website:

[www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)

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[store.camh.ca](http://store.camh.ca)

If you have questions or feedback about services at CAMH, contact the Patient and Family Experience (PFE) Office:

416 535-8501, ext. 32028; [pfe@camh.ca](mailto:pfe@camh.ca)

Family members can access the Family Resource Centre (FRC) and the RBC Patient and Family Learning Space (PFLS) for support, resources and help connecting to services.

1025 Queen St. W. (McCain Complex Care and Recovery Building)

FRC: 416 535-8501, ext. 32028; [pfe@camh.ca](mailto:pfe@camh.ca)

PFLS: 416 535-8501, ext. 33995; [pfls@camh.ca](mailto:pfls@camh.ca);

[www.camh.ca/pfls](http://www.camh.ca/pfls)

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