

when
a parent has
experienced psychosis...

what
kids want to know



CHILDREN HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS WHEN someone in their family is sick. When children don't have answers to their questions, they tend to come up with their own, which can be incorrect and scary!

When a family member has had psychosis, it can easily become a secret that nobody talks about. All children need some explanation and support, geared to their age, to help them understand this disorder.

Each parent and child's first conversations about psychosis will be different. How you address the subject will depend on the child's age and ability to manage the information—you know your child best. This brochure will help prepare you to take the first step in discussing this disorder with your child.

Questions kids have

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.”
 - The brain contains many chemicals that help us think, feel and act. When a person has psychosis, his or her brain works differently because the chemicals are out of balance. This imbalance also happens with other disorders in the body, such as diabetes and high blood pressure.
 - Psychotic symptoms can occur in a number of illnesses. They include schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Psychotic symptoms can also be caused by another medical condition in the body.
 - Some of the most common symptoms include:
 - Difficulties with perception (the way the person understands things). The person may feel and look confused. He or she may hear voices or see things that aren't really there, or that other people can't hear or see. These are called “hallucinations.” People with psychosis may not be able to hear what someone else is asking or telling them.
 - Strange thoughts and beliefs. These are called “delusions.” For example, people with psychosis may believe someone is following them or wants to harm them—this is called a “paranoid delusion.”
 - Scary or confused talk. Sometimes the person may say things that are scary, or may make up an unbelievable story. He or she may say things that don't seem to make sense.
 - Difficulties with expressing feelings. The person may have a hard time talking about or showing their feelings to their children (for example, giving hugs or saying “I love you”). They may even say mean things. This can be scary and painful for children.
- A person with psychosis may not have all of these symptoms.

When and how does psychosis start?

- The child is *not* the cause of the parent's psychosis.
- It's unclear why, but some people get psychosis more easily than others do. Scientists are doing research to try to find out why.
- There are many possible causes of psychosis. Sometimes the causes are not known. The cause in one person can be different from the cause in someone else.
- Psychosis can develop suddenly or gradually.
- Sometimes, the symptoms seem to come after a life crisis, stress or other illness.
- For other people, using certain street drugs can cause psychotic symptoms.

Can my mom or dad's psychosis ever be fixed?

- Yes. The good news is that today, psychosis is treatable.
- As the person gets treatment, the strange thoughts, feelings and behaviour gradually go away. For some people this happens quickly, and for others it takes longer.
- Sometimes psychotic symptoms may remain or come back, and they can be treated again.
- Some people have only one psychotic episode in their lifetime (for example, someone with major depression). Others may have many psychotic episodes over a long period (for example, someone with schizophrenia). It all depends on the person and the type of illness. Some people may have only a few symptoms, and may still be able to get on with their lives (for example, go to work or school, or do housework).

How can my mom or dad get better?

- A person with psychosis may be the most sick at the beginning of his or her illness. This can be a very confusing and frightening time, both for the ill person and for the family. Doctors, nurses and other health care workers will try to help the person with treatments that have helped other people with psychosis.
- Different treatments are available. They include medication and talk therapy.
 - *Medication* helps the chemicals in the brain to work as usual. Then the person can begin to feel and act more like his or her usual self.
 - *Talk therapy* with a focus on feelings lets the person talk to a therapist about what it is like to have this illness and about finding ways to cope.
 - *Talk therapy* with a focus on managing everyday life teaches people to help themselves when they have early symptoms of psychosis. They learn how to get more control over the illness (for example, by talking to friends or to a therapist) and how to get back on track with their life (for example, how to handle money, make meals and stay healthy).

Is there anything I can do to make my mom or dad better?

- Family support is really important, but it is the adults who are responsible for being the “helpers,” not the kids.
- Even though kids can't fix the illness, sometimes it will help your parent just to know that you are there (for example, by giving your parent a card or photo, or talking to him or her on the phone). It is best to talk with other adults in the family, or to the health care workers caring for your mom or dad, to see what will be most helpful.
- Your dad or mom might have said or done strange things when he or she was ill. Remember that these things were related to the illness—not to anything you did wrong. It can be helpful for you to talk to someone about what this was like for you.

What if my mom or dad has to go to hospital? What happens there?

- Sometimes people with psychosis may need to go to hospital. If this happens, people at the hospital will take care of your parent and make sure your parent gets the help he or she needs. Your parent will have a comfortable room where he or she can rest.
- It is OK to ask questions about what is happening with your mom or dad. Kids have a right to have their questions answered.

What if my mom or dad is too sick to look after me?

- Family members should try to have a plan in place so the child knows what will happen if his or her parent has to go to hospital. Review this plan with the child and ask the child what he or she thinks. Make arrangements with a “safe person”—someone the child feels comfortable talking to—who can support the child if the parent is not available.
- If the parent can't take care of the child, the adults caring for the child should help the child understand why. They should help the child maintain contact with the parent as he or she gets better—even if only by phone or letter. Other parts of the child's life should be kept as normal as possible, including attending the same school and maintaining friendships. Children may feel guilty about playing, having fun and maybe laughing every now and then—it's important to talk about this.
- Sometimes children live in a home with only one parent. If the parent becomes too sick to care for the child, the child may have to stay with other family members or, sometimes, with a foster family. This change can be very hard for the child, who will miss and worry about his or her parent.
 - Remember that your mom or dad is getting help. As he or she begins to feel better, you will be able to spend time together again.

What do I tell kids at school? Will they think bad things about my family?

- Most people find it hard to talk about mental illness. It often makes people uncomfortable because they don't know much about it. Children sometimes feel sad, not only because their parent is ill, but also because their friends don't understand. When people learn more, their ideas often change.
- Sometimes children are ashamed that their parent has a mental illness. They may find the illness hard to talk about, and may not want to talk about it. But it's important for kids to talk with people who understand how they feel. It helps kids to feel better and to see that it's OK to feel the way they do.
- Some people look down on a family that has experienced a mental illness. Mental illnesses can make people think they are different. Sometimes kids will make mean jokes or pick on others because of this. The important thing is to help children deal with these comments. They can choose to ignore them. They can also tell an adult right away. Children can also practise saying something simple, like:
 - "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."
- Adults in the child's life should help children decide how much information to share, and with whom. The child needs to know that he or she does not have to share details. If a child decides to talk with a friend, it may help if an adult is present. Adults can teach children to stop conversations when they get uncomfortable. For example, kids can say, "Thanks for asking, but I don't want to talk about this any more."

Will it happen to me? Will I get it too?

- Psychosis is a mental illness; it's not something you can "catch" from someone else, like a cold.
- Psychosis is rare, but no one can know for sure if he or she will experience it at some point in life.
- It's natural to worry about this. Psychosis is like other illnesses: if you have this kind of mental illness in your family, you might be at greater risk yourself. But it is still a very small chance—there is a much bigger chance that you *won't* get the illness.
- To protect themselves against psychosis, kids should focus on what they can do to deal with stress and to lead a balanced life.

What should I do if I'm scared? What can I do when I'm really worried about my mom or dad?

- Sometimes children feel better if they make an action plan with their parents. This helps them decide what to do when they are scared.
- Action plans can include:
 - making a list of signs that tell the child that the parent is doing well, or is not doing well
 - having the name and number of an adult whom the child can call.
- Children need an adult they can talk to if their parent isn't available. This could be another family member, a teacher, a friend's parent or the family doctor.
- It can be hard for a child to live with a parent who has psychosis. The parent may do or say things that make the child feel scared, sad, angry or confused. For example, the parent may not know what he or she is saying, or may talk to an imaginary person while looking at the child. That can feel very strange to a child. Children need other important people in their lives to talk with, and to give them reassurance.
- If the child is worried and has no one to talk to, he or she can call Kids Help Phone at 1 800 668-6868 to talk to an adult who can help. If there is an emergency, the child can call 911.

Need more information or help?

If you want more information about psychosis and how it affects children and families, speak to your family doctor or call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) at 1 800 463-6273, or 416 595-6111 in Toronto.

Other resources include:

Schizophrenia Society of Ontario
130 Spadina Avenue, Suite 302
Toronto ON M5V 2L4
Tel.: 1 800 449-6367 or 416 449-6830 in Toronto
Fax: 416 449-8434
E-mail: sso@schizophrenia.on.ca
www.schizophrenia.on.ca

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario
40 Orchard View Boulevard, Suite 222
Toronto ON M4R 1B9
Tel.: 1 888 486-8236 or 416 486-8046 in Toronto
Fax: 416 486-8127
E-mail: info@mooddisorders.on.ca
www.mooddisorders.on.ca

Also available from CAMH:

First Episode Psychosis: An Information Guide
(product code: PM015)
· This guide outlines the causes, symptoms and treatment of psychosis and the course of recovery.

Women and Psychosis: An Information Guide
(product code: PM021)
· This guide is for women who have had a psychotic episode, and for their families.

Schizophrenia: An Information Guide
(product code: PM009)
· This guide provides a basic understanding of schizophrenia, including the symptoms and treatments.

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