



# What Is Psychosis?

**Psychosis is a condition that affects a person's ability to know what is real versus what is not real.** The experiences of hearing voices and having unusual thoughts often occur in psychosis.

**Psychosis is more common than people think.** About 3% of all people experience psychosis at some point in their lives. Many health disorders can include psychosis: schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression, a bad reaction to surgery, and others. You don't need to know all about these medical diagnoses to learn how to deal more effectively with psychosis.

## *Psychosis is not...*

Just because a person has an unusual thought from time to time does not mean that the person is experiencing psychosis. Having unusual thoughts is not psychosis when these thoughts occur but can be put out of one's mind easily.

## *Psychosis is...*

**Psychosis = sometimes having trouble figuring out what is real**

Suppose your unusual thoughts won't go away, and you get confused about what is or isn't real. You may also start to have other strange experiences, such as hearing or seeing things that aren't there.

You may feel confused and frightened. It may become difficult to do things that you were able to do just a while ago. A number of distressing changes can happen in psychosis.

### **Common symptoms of psychosis include:**

1. Strange and unrealistic thoughts that won't go away even when other people believe the thoughts can't be true.
2. Hearing things or seeing things that aren't there.



Your Turn!

## Your Turn!

Write down any symptoms or problems you might have that could indicate psychosis.

Strange or unrealistic thoughts that won't go away

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Hearing or seeing things that aren't there

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Write Symptoms or Problems

People experiencing psychosis often develop other types of problems, such as:

- Wanting to be alone all the time
- Feeling sad or anxious
- Feeling “high” or excited
- Difficulty sleeping
- Finding it hard to get out and do things
- Using alcohol or drugs



Your Turn!

## Your Turn!

Please check any of the boxes that apply to you.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wanting to be alone all the time | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty sleeping                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling sad or anxious           | <input type="checkbox"/> Finding it hard to get out and do things |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling “high” or excited        | <input type="checkbox"/> Using alcohol or drugs                   |

### More about psychosis...

There are many different reasons why a person may develop psychosis. In fact, *nobody* is immune from psychosis. Psychosis occurs in all sorts of people across all cultures. Almost everyone would develop psychosis by going without sleep for a long period of time or overusing certain drugs, such as amphetamines, for an extended period.

Developing psychosis has nothing at all to do with being *mentally weak*. You cannot simply “will” yourself to not develop psychosis.

Research shows that a number of things can influence an onset of psychosis. These things can be grouped together into **six factors: situation, physical state, thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and actions**. These factors interact with each other. For example, a stressful *situation* affects your *physical state*. When your *physical state* changes, your *thoughts* may also change.

## A Closer Look at the Six Factors

### Situation

Psychosis often begins with a situation that is stressful.

Many different types of situations can cause stress, such as:

- Death of a loved one
- Moving to a new country or a new city
- Changing schools
- Taking on a new job
- Breaking up with someone
- Not having enough money to pay the bills
- People being critical or hostile toward you



Understanding



## Understanding



The risk of developing psychosis increases when a person is faced with a stressful situation.

This doesn't mean that people only develop psychosis when things are not going well. Some people develop psychosis when everything seems fine for them. The psychosis seems to come out of nowhere. However, learning skills to manage stress can help anybody with psychosis to recover and stay well.

### *Physical State*

Many different types of physical states can increase a person's risk of developing psychosis.



### Understanding

## Genes

Some evidence indicates that certain **genes** may increase the likelihood of psychosis.

If one of your relatives has experienced psychosis, then your risk of psychosis is somewhat increased because you share many of the same genes with your relative. However, just because a person has a family history of psychosis does not mean that the person will automatically develop psychosis. Other factors need to be present for psychosis to develop.

## Brain

The **brain** is very important in psychosis. It appears that changes to certain brain systems can increase the risk of psychosis. Many **drugs** cause changes in the brain, so drug use can also increase your risk of psychosis.

## Sleep

Finally, poor **sleep** is a problem that often occurs in psychosis. A person with psychosis sometimes can't sleep or sleeps too much. Problems with sleeping can increase your risk of psychosis and make it harder to recover.

## Thoughts

If you're suffering from psychosis, you may also find it difficult to think in a realistic way about your situation. Your **thinking may be distorted**.

This distorted thinking can take four forms:

1. You just can't make sense of your situation. Things may seem confused or meaningless.
2. Your situation seems dangerous. You may think that other people are plotting against you or planning to harm you.
3. You believe that you have extra special powers or abilities, that you have an exceptionally special role in the world far beyond almost anyone.
4. You may think that ordinary events have more personal meaning to you than to other people. For example, you listen to the news on television and think that the announcer is speaking directly to you.

Any of these kinds of distortions put you out of touch with reality, with the result that you can't accurately understand what's going on around you. This, in turn, makes it harder to deal with the situation appropriately.



## Understanding

### Perceptions

People with psychosis often develop problems with how they perceive reality. The world may seem *different*.

It may be more **difficult to “tune out” things** such as street noise or people in a crowd. A person may become more sensitive to noise or light. Determining what is and isn't important may become difficult. The experience may feel overwhelming.

People suffering from psychosis may hear, smell, taste, feel, or see things that other people do not also experience. If this happens to you, then you are experiencing what is called a **hallucination**. A common type of hallucination in psychosis is to hear voices that no one else can hear.

### Emotions

If you are suffering from psychosis, you may find that you have emotional responses that you wouldn't normally have—your **emotions may be distorted**.

Emotional distortion can take three different forms:

1. It is no longer easy for you to show or feel emotion. For example, you may smile less, or you may cry less. Your emotions seem to be flat.
2. You develop intense feelings of fear that don't seem to fit with the real situation.
3. You feel extremely good or “high,” which doesn't seem to fit with the real situation.

The type of emotion you experience will be influenced by other factors, such as your thoughts. Being frightened makes sense when you are thinking that other people plan to harm you in some way—but in psychosis these thoughts and the related emotions don't actually fit with the real situation.



### Understanding

## Actions

### DISCONNECTING FROM OTHER PEOPLE

It is common in psychosis to disconnect from other people. During psychosis, you may find it difficult to communicate with others. You may not be sure what other people are thinking or feeling when you have a discussion with them. You may feel distant from other people and prefer to be left alone.

Psychosis involves problems understanding what is and isn't real. This lack of understanding makes it difficult to know what is happening. It may feel uncomfortable being around other people when you don't know what is going on.

However, disconnecting from people is actually an unhealthy action. Having support from other people will help you *get* better and *stay* better.

### LACK OF MOTIVATION

Another change you might have noticed is that psychosis can make it very difficult to do simple things that used to be easy.

For example, just getting out of your house, taking a shower, or cleaning your bedroom may seem difficult. Or, you may not care whether you participate in interesting activities that you used to enjoy, such as going to the movies or engaging in your hobbies. Your motivation to do things just seems to be lacking.

Having a **lack of motivation** does not mean you are lazy. It is a symptom of psychosis that needs treatment and requires effort to overcome.

Don't be discouraged. **Remember that these problems are treatable.** The next section shares some strategies you can use to help control psychosis.