

# HeadsUp

## ● Early Psychosis: A Guide for Friends

When a friend begins acting in a way that is new and concerning it can be confusing, stressful, and even scary. It may be difficult to figure out if your friend is experiencing something very serious. You might not know where to turn or feel you don't have the right skills to help. While it can be overwhelming, there are empowering steps you can take to both understand and support a friend facing mental health challenges.

### Asking for help can be HARD

It may be confusing and uncomfortable to see a friend going through a tough time. It can be especially hard to decide **when you should bring concerns about a friend to the attention of an adult, and how to do that without breaking your friend's trust.**

You don't have to share your friend's identity right away. Reach out to a trusted adult in your life and say something like, "a friend of mine is behaving differently, and I am worried about them. What should I do?"

REMEMBER!

It is important to pay attention and not ignore obvious changes in your friend and symptoms will vary from person to person.

### Some examples of adults you may choose to turn to are:

- Family members (yours or your friend's)
- People at school (teachers, counselors, advisors, coaches)
- People in your local community that you trust

REMEMBER!

It is not a good idea to use social media platforms to ask for help.

### If a friend begins receiving treatment for their mental health remember:

The path of recovery is sometimes isolating. While it may feel difficult to be with your friend during this time, it is often extremely helpful to keep in touch and show up for them. Try and be a good listener and offer hope and encouragement. **Let your friend know they are not alone.**

# What is Psychosis??

Psychosis is a symptom, not a disease. A person with psychosis is sometimes unable to distinguish what is real and what is not. The word “psychosis” is used to describe a variety of symptoms that affect the mind and behavior and may include:

## Hallucinations - Hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and/or feeling things that others do not.

Your friend may tell you they are experiencing these, or you may notice cues in their behavior such as:

- Looking somewhere and you don't know why
- Focusing on certain body parts
- Talking to voices that you cannot hear
- Talking to themselves

### Helpful Tips for Hallucinations:

- Focus more on their feelings of stress and discomfort, rather than arguing about whether their experiences are real. (“I am sorry you are feeling afraid.”)
- Avoid figuring out what your friend is talking about or to whom they are talking to
- Distract your friend if you can
- Try changing the subject to something simple and positive.
- Avoid asking your friend to try and force voices to stop (if they say they are hearing voices)

## Delusions - Persistent beliefs that are not shared by others.

- Think other people are watching them
- Feel very good at certain tasks or that they have a superpower
- Have a special connection to a famous person
- Talking about strange or unusual things
- Seem uneasy and irritated with others
- Commenting they are suspicious of other people; that they are being tricked

### Helpful Tips for Delusions:

- Don't use the word “crazy” when describing your friend, their thoughts and/or their actions
- Don't pretend to agree with strange ideas that you can't understand
- Try not to laugh or say the thoughts are stupid or not true
- Avoid arguing with the person about their thoughts. Delusions are extremely fixed and difficult to change
- Acknowledge and honor the feeling(s) that come with the experiences your friend is having. (“It must be scary to believe...”)
- Use body language that shows support for your friend, such as sitting next to them

## Changes in Self-Care & Behavior -

### A noticeable shift in what is typical for your friend.

- Skipping sports practices or other school activities
- Decline in schoolwork/grades
- Sitting for a long time doing nothing
- No longer making or keeping eye contact
- Dressing inappropriately (for example, dressing in lots of warm clothing when it is hot)
- Seeming more sad/depressed or happy/hyper
- Sleeping more or less than usual
- Sleeping at different times than usual, staying up during the night and sleeping during the day
- Change/Increase in substance use
- Not engaging with friends and family as usual
- Talking more/less, or faster/slower than usual
- Using words in unusual ways or making up new words
- Showing strong or inappropriate emotions, including aggression, or no emotions at all

REMEMBER!

Many of these things can happen for other reasons than psychosis, and you may question or worry that you are “making too much” of them. You may also not be sure if these are just typical behaviors for a teen or young adult. You do not have to feel that you should know the difference, there are professionals available to help sort things out.

# REMEMBER!

Aggression is no more common among people experiencing psychosis than in the general population. However, if aggression occurs, it is good to know what to do.

## Tips for Changes in Self-Care & Behavior

### IF AGGRESSION OCCURS:

- It's very important not to ignore verbal threats or warnings of violence made to you or others. If you feel threatened, leave the situation
- Do not crowd or touch your friend. Firmly say, "Please stop," offer space and try to move to a quiet space that is not crowded
- If you are able to remain with your friend, stay calm (keep a neutral facial expression and tone of voice), don't argue or get angry yourself
- Remind yourself that anger/aggression may be directed against you because you are the closest person – it is not necessarily a personal attack
- Listen and try to work out why the person is angry/upset - if you can't, ask why
- Summarize what you think your friend means and ask if correct
- Try to see what triggers aggression and try to avoid the behavior/situation (for example, certain topics of conversation)
- If all else fails, call 911 – explain that there is a mental health situation
- Try not to take these changes personally
- Just because a person is not showing emotion does not mean they don't have feelings.
- Gently remind or encourage your friend to participate in activities, for example, "We really miss you playing violin in our orchestra, do you want to go to rehearsal tomorrow together?"

### Changes in Thinking - A noticeable shift in what is typical for your friend.

- Trouble thinking clearly, concentrating, or processing what's going on around them
- Seeming confused
- Jumping from topic to topic
- Losing track of what they are saying or what others are saying to them
- Seeming "spaced out"
- Decline in schoolwork/grades

### Tips for Changes in Thinking:

- Repeat things, calmly, if necessary.
- Speak slowly and allow a lot of time for the person to answer. Avoid filling in long pauses with possible responses or changing subjects.
- Offer the option to take a break from something if it seems draining to your friend. For example, "Let's take a break and go get a snack (or listen to music, talk a walk, or other activity your friend enjoys)."

# CRISIS??

### What indicates a crisis and what should I do if I think my friend is in one?

It may feel easier to ignore concerning changes, but it is important to reach out right away when your friend is in distress. Indications of a crisis can include:

- When your friend's behavior puts the person at risk of harming themselves or others
- Without crisis responding or intervention, your friend seems likely to be placed in a more restrictive setting like the hospital or prison
- The person cannot resolve a situation with the skills and resources available

# REMEMBER!

Always take talk of suicide seriously

If there is an immediate concern about your friend's safety, get help immediately. Involve other family members, call your local crisis service or the police, or take your friend to the emergency room of your local hospital.

Do not leave your friend alone unless you feel you are in physical danger.

**IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT PERSONAL SAFETY AT ANY TIME, LEAVE THE LOCATION IMMEDIATELY**

# Help is available

Early assessment and treatment provide the best hope for recovery. A First Episode Psychosis (FEP) Center offers specialized care, or treatment, to help manage the symptoms of psychosis that may be interfering with someone's ability to live a full life.

At our Pennsylvania FEP Centers, we offer what is referred to as **Coordinated Specialty Care (CSC)**, which is a general term used to describe a **recovery-oriented treatment program** that utilizes a team of specialists who collaborate in the creation of a plan based on an individual's needs and preferences.

CSC uses a team-based approach with **shared decision-making** that focuses on working with individuals to reach their recovery goals. These programs are available in a growing number of areas.



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## Key Components of Coordinated Specialty Care

### Talk Therapy

Talk therapy to help build personal skills of resiliency, management, and coping.

### Supported Employment & Education

Assistance with continuing to engage in or adjust to school and work goals while receiving care.

### Medication Management

If necessary, finding the best medication at the lowest possible dose.

### Peer Support

Guidance from those currently on their own recovery path.

### Case Management

Skills and support to organize the practical issues presented during treatment. This includes communication with other team members.

### Family Support and Education

Tools designed to keep family members engaged and informed.

To locate your local FEP program visit the “Find a Center” page on our website.

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