Handout 2: Understanding Psychotic Illness

A *Psychosis* refers to a state where a person loses contact with reality. The word is derived from the Latin words “Psyche” meaning mind and “osis” meaning illness. Some commonly used expressions to describe this state are: “Out of touch with reality” “Spinning out”, “Going off the planet”.

There are four main types of symptoms in psychosis. These are:

- Disorders of perception - hallucinations
- Disorders of Thinking – delusions and thought disorders
- Disturbances in behaviour
- Disturbances in feelings and emotions (affect).

A *hallucination* refers to when a person may hear, see, feel, taste, smell or taste things, which are not there. Hallucinations may be:

- auditory (hearing) eg hearing ‘voices’
- visual (seeing) eg seeing spiders crawling on the floor
- tactile (touch) eg feeling something on your skin
- olfactory (smell) eg smelling gas
- gustatory (taste) eg strange tastes.

Delusions are falsely held fixed ideas not shared by peers. They are *falsely held* in that there may be some truth in the idea but the reason for believing the idea is base on irrational thinking. They are *fixed* because generally the person can’t be talked out of the idea.

Some examples of delusions:

- A *paranoid delusion* or a feeling of being persecuted, thinking people are following you, watching you.
- *Guilt* or an sense of worthlessness, or that you have done great harm. Somatic (means bodily) delusion – an idea that there is something wrong or strange about your body.
- *Grandiose delusion* or thinking that you are specially chosen, have special powers, have special connections.

Disorders of thinking

There are a number of disorders of thinking. These include:

- Thought Disorder – thoughts are jumbled up, thoughts just stop, thoughts are off the point
- Ideas of reference – believing that things refer to you personally eg thinking that the TV News relates to you
- Thought insertion – believing that thoughts can be put into your head by someone
- Thought broadcasting – believing that your thoughts can be heard by everyone.
What are some of the disturbances in behaviour and feelings?

**Changed feelings:** A person experiencing a psychotic episode may feel strange and cut off from the world with everything moving in slow motion. Emotions may seem dampened and the person may feel less emotion than before, or show less emotion to those around or may withdraw socially.

**Anxiety/Agitation:** Very often emotions are in turmoil. Things seem in some way not right or normal. This can be a time of great fear and stress when a person’s usual methods to calm him or herself don’t seem to work. This leads to much anxiety and fear about what is happening.

**Changed behaviour:** A person experiencing psychosis may have differently from the way they usually do. You may be extremely active or lethargic. Often, changes in behaviour are associated with the other symptoms of psychosis.

What are the causes of psychosis?

- Drugs and alcohol
- Physical illness
- Organic cause.

How long does psychosis last?

Psychosis is time-limited. Generally a psychotic episode lasts less than one month.

Or

May be part of an ongoing psychotic illness.

Psychotic Illnesses

**Schizoaffective disorder** – symptoms of both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. People with schizoaffective disorder are generally treated for the particular symptoms they have.

**Schizophreniform disorder** – Schizophreniform disorder is diagnosed if psychotic symptoms last more than one month but less than six months. Symptoms are similar to those of schizophrenia.

**Drug induced psychosis** – Drug induced psychosis is brought on solely by the use of drugs in someone who is predisposed to a psychotic episode. With a drug induced psychosis the symptoms appear quickly and last a relatively short time, hours to days, until the effects of the drug wear off. Disorientation, memory problems and visual hallucinations are the most common symptoms.

**Delusional disorder** – If you have delusional disorder you may hold strong beliefs in things, which are not true. You may have delusions of being persecuted, that people are out to get you; or that you are someone famous.

**Major depression** – Someone who has major depression has a type of depression, which is so intense it causes loss of interest and enjoyment, loss of appetite, severe insomnia and even psychotic symptoms- such as delusions.
Post-partum psychosis – Post-partum psychosis can be brought on by hormonal changes after childbirth, and often resembles schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Post-partum psychosis happens to about 1 in 500 pregnant women.

Other illnesses – Other physical illnesses altogether can affect the brain- causing psychotic symptoms. Some of these illnesses include AIDS, thyroid disorder, brain tumour, Huntington’s disease and viral infection.

Schizophrenia
What does schizophrenia mean?

- An ongoing psychotic illness which interferes with a person’s ability to think, feel and act
- Not “split personality” – schizophrenia is thought to be a splitting of the personality from reality. A person with schizophrenia is not inhabited by two personalities – he or she has one personality but may be affected by disordered thinking which could lead to unusual and out of character behaviour
- Its name is derived from, the Latin Schizos = Fractured/broken and Phrenos = Mind or Brain.

What are the symptoms of schizophrenia?

There are two kinds of symptoms in schizophrenia:

- ‘Positive (active) symptoms’
  - Delusions
  - Hallucinations
  - Thought disorders

And

- ‘Negative (passive) symptoms’ – a failure to respond to stimuli (internal or external)
  - Flatness of affect - blunted emotions
  - Poverty of ideas
  - Loss of interest
  - Lack of motivation/drive/initiative
  - Poverty of speech
  - Diminished expressive behaviour, self-care and personal function.

Is psychosis the same as schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a psychotic illness but a person can have a psychotic episode without having schizophrenia.

For a person to be given a diagnosis of schizophrenia the person will:

- Exhibit disturbed thinking – this means the person has experienced psychotic symptoms
• Have had a decline in functioning – ie they will perform below their previous level of achievement
• Have the condition for at least 6 months.

What is the incidence of schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia affects 1 in 100 Australians – this means that it is a very common disorder in medical terms.

How old are people when they develop schizophrenia?

Generally the age of onset (i.e when the person first gets sick) is:

For Men - 16-25 years.
For Women 18 – 30 years.

Schizophrenia is a disorder of young people – it usually begins in late adolescence.

What are the causes of schizophrenia?

• It’s not yet completely known
• May be different causes for different forms of schizophrenia
• Genetics and environment both contribute
• People inherit a predisposition to the illness
• Stress is a precipitant, not the cause.

If you would like more information try http://www.nisad.org.au/sitemap.html.

What is the outcome for people with schizophrenia – what happens to people with the illness?

25% - 30% have a complete recovery
35% - 40% have recurrent ‘episodes’ of illness
30% - 35% have chronic (ongoing) symptoms, disability

10% suicide rate – this is a much higher rate than for the general population.

Is schizophrenia an illness?

Schizophrenia is generally thought to be a brain disease or group of brain diseases.
• A disorder in the way that information is processed in the brain
• Information is transmitted from one neuron to another by chemicals called neurotransmitters
• Schizophrenia is believed to be caused by chemical changes that cause a breakdown in those systems
• People with schizophrenia are thought to have too much of a chemical called dopamine.
What are some of the interventions which help people with schizophrenia:

- Medication
- Peer support – contact with other people who have had similar experiences
- Optimism and Support for recovery
- Community-based support – individual support plan
- Crisis intervention when needed
- Practical support - housing, employment, accommodation.

What are some of the problems of people with a mental illness

- Stigma
- Family response
- Discrimination
- Isolation
- Employment, finances, accommodation
- Drugs and alcohol
- Medication and side effects
- Dealing with the symptoms of an illness

And

- Everything else that happens in life to everyone.

Are people with a mental illness aggressive?

Mental illness in itself does not always cause aggression. People can have different reasons for behaving in an aggressive manner. They pay present as aggressive because:

- May be the person is angry
- Of how the person is being treated because of the mental illness
- The person has an aggressive personality of the illness.

Are people with a mental illness sick all the time?

No. People have episodes of mental illness. An episode of illness may be:

- mild - minor
- major – severe

An acute episode means that the person is having a lot of symptoms.

What does schizophrenia feel like?

“When I had my first breakdown I felt like an egg that had been dropped on the kitchen floor.
Part of the shell is still intact but part of it is shattered and the egg-white is leaking out of it. The egg-white is my personality, and I can not get it together again.” From the audio-cassette of ABC Science Show – Schizophrenia. Produced by Anne Deveson.
“It’s like all the electric wires in the house are plugged into my brain and everyone has a different voice. So, I can’t think. Some of the voices tell me things like what to do, and that people are watching me. I know that there are really not any voices, but I feel as though there are, and that I should listen to them, or something will happen to me. I see thongs ... in crowds. I see people looking at me, and talking about me. Sometimes I hear them planning to kill me. I don’t want to die. I want to be like everyone else.” From the film on Schizophrenia “Promise”.