

# PSYCHOSIS



Mental Health Foundation  
*mauri tū, mauri ora* OF NEW ZEALAND

## What is psychosis?

The term 'psychosis' describes when someone experiences reality differently from other people. It can mean hearing, feeling or seeing things others can't, or believing things differently from everyone around you.

A psychotic episode can occur as part of an illness, a traumatic experience, misuse of alcohol or drugs, or a mental health condition such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. It can also be experienced as part of dementia.

Some people experience a psychotic episode just once, or a few times, in their lives. For others, psychotic episodes happen often, with little break in between.

Experiencing psychosis can be distressing, both for the person and their whānau and friends. But help is available, and with support you can learn to manage the experiences and recover in a meaningful way for you.

'Recovery' may not mean you no longer experience psychosis at all. Instead, it may mean you are able to live well, with or without psychotic episodes.

## What is psychosis like?

Everyone's experience of psychosis is unique, but there are common themes:

- **Hallucinations:** Seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and/or smelling things that aren't there. Hearing voices is a common experience – this can be positive and comforting, or it can be disturbing and scary.
- **Delusions:** Believing things that are not based in reality. This could be a belief that you can read minds or predict the future, for example.
- **Paranoia:** A delusion that you are being followed or watched, or that others are out to get you.
- **Disorganised thinking, speech and behaviour:** Talking fast, jumping from topic to topic, being hard to understand or follow.

Emotional response to these experiences can include feeling scared, confused, suspicious, frustrated, upset, abandoned and more.

It's important to note that some of these experiences are relatively common. Some people can make sense of them in a cultural or spiritual context. You would only be treated for psychosis if it is causing you distress and preventing you from living well.

## Prejudice and discrimination

Psychosis is not well understood in our society. Many people think that people living with psychosis are dangerous. The truth is that the majority of people who experience psychosis will never be violent.

Many also think that the condition is incurable and the person will always be unwell. That's also incorrect.

Because of these misunderstandings around psychosis and mental health in general, it can be hard to seek help. We can all help challenge these prejudices.

## What is schizophrenia?

If you experience psychosis for a long period of time and it is having a severe impact on your life, the psychiatric term 'schizophrenia' may be applied. In addition to psychosis, this can also include having low energy, loss of motivation, less enjoyment of life, withdrawal from others and trouble concentrating.

Schizophrenia diagnoses are quite rare – about six to seven people out of every 1,000 in Aotearoa.

## What is schizo-affective disorder?

People who live with this disorder will experience psychosis as well as elements of mood disorders. These experiences can be similar to bipolar disorder (with periods of mania and periods of depression), or depression on its own.

## What is your path forward?

There are effective treatments that can help you manage psychosis and live a fulfilling life. The main components are medication and talking therapies.

A doctor or specialist may prescribe antipsychotic **medication** to reduce the voices, delusions etc. They may also prescribe medication to manage things like anxiety or poor sleep. Talk to your doctor about what is right for you. Make sure you are well informed about possible side effects (and how to manage them).

Don't stop taking your medication or change your dose without talking to your health professional first. Stopping suddenly can make you feel worse.

**Talking therapies** such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and trauma informed, strengths-based, psychodynamic and mindfulness-informed therapies can be very helpful. Research

shows that a combination of medication and therapy is more effective than medication alone.

A good therapist, who has a good understanding of psychosis and who you feel comfortable with, can help identify patterns of thought and behaviour that are unhelpful. They will work with you to learn new ways to manage challenges, and help build your resilience.

Treatment can also include cultural support, family interventions, occupational therapy, and social work support. These are important as they support people with communication, activities of daily living, and re-engaging with the wider community.

## Strategies for recovery

There is no one answer to recovery, but there are some key aspects that are considered important by 'experience-based experts' – people who live with psychosis. Essentially, looking after your own mental, emotional and physical health is key to getting through tough times and to maintaining wellbeing.

- **Recovery will be a journey.** Work with your cultural, family and other supports, and keep trying. Things will get easier.
- **Learn** about psychosis and read/listen to stories of other people who have found a way to manage it.
- Get to know your **early warning signs** or triggers, and identify and reduce stressful activities.
- **Develop strategies** you can use when you feel an episode building. Work with a trusted whānau member or support person, and your doctor or therapist. **Make a plan** for difficult times.
- **Look after your health.** Eat well, make sure you get enough sleep, and include some exercise in your life. It's best to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
- Connect with **cultural healing** practices that use karakia, mirimiri (massage) and rongoā (natural medicines) drawn from mātauranga Māori.
- Use **relaxation** exercises like breathing, yoga, meditation, or massage.
- Spend time on activities that bring you **purpose and joy**, such as time in nature or creative hobbies – music, art, kapa haka and more.
- **Peer support groups** can connect you with others who have similar experiences. Find a group here: [mentalhealth.org.nz/groups](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/groups)

## Supporting someone with psychosis

Walking alongside someone who experiences psychosis can be challenging at times. You may go through difficult times with your loved one. Your aroha (love) and āwhina (support) will make a huge difference.

Remember that any strategies for recovery might not immediately feel useful to the person themselves. Being ready to accept a diagnosis, and therefore help, can take time.

Your friend or loved one is going through changes to the way they relate to themselves and the world around them. This can sometimes be very hard to make sense of.

- Maintain connection and build trust – whanaungatanga is often key to recovery. Keep in touch and keep them included.
- Ask them what they need. Try not to take over.
- Remember that psychosis is an illness and is not anyone's fault. It is important not to blame or judge, even when we don't understand what is going on for them.
- We all need the same things for a good life – connections, a safe home, freedom from worries and a meaningful role in the community. As whānau and friends, you can help them build this.
- Encourage and support them to seek treatment, and to persevere with therapy and medication. Recovery will be an ongoing process.
- Find ways to look after yourself and maintain your own wellbeing. Find out more at [mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing).



Stay  
connected

## Keep learning

Learn more about psychosis and strategies that can help. See websites such as [healthify.nz](https://www.healthify.nz) and [talkingminds.co.nz](https://www.talkingminds.co.nz). Find book reviews at [mentalhealth.org.nz/books](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/books) or visit your local library.

## Digital tools

Use free digital tools and support programmes available online. Check out [smallsteps.org.nz](https://www.smallsteps.org.nz), [thelowdown.co.nz](https://www.thelowdown.co.nz), or [justathought.co.nz](https://www.justathought.co.nz)

## Helplines

Talking through challenges with a trained professional can help. Call or text 1737 to speak to a trained counsellor.

More helplines can be found at:  
[mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines)

## Disclaimer

This brochure should not be used in place of an accurate diagnosis or assessment. If you think you may have psychosis or would like further information or support, please talk to your GP or Māori health provider.

## Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of free mental health and wellbeing information and resources. Visit [shop.mentalhealth.org.nz](https://shop.mentalhealth.org.nz)

## Find us online

To find out more about our work, visit:

 [resource@mentalhealth.org.nz](mailto:resource@mentalhealth.org.nz)

 [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)

 [mhfnz](https://www.instagram.com/mhfnz)

 [mentalhealthfoundationNZ](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundationNZ)

## Help us, to help others

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Visit [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz) to find out more.

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