



headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation



**How can I support
someone with psychosis?**

Being a family member or friend of someone experiencing psychosis can be challenging and sometimes distressing. You might feel shocked, anxious, confused or bewildered. These feelings are ok – there is no right or wrong way to feel.

Correctly identifying psychosis and getting help may have been difficult or taken some time, as it's easy to mistake early psychosis for the normal ups and downs that young people go through. Often, families and friends have lots of questions and may not know what to do next or where to get the support they need. It can be particularly difficult to know how to best help the person experiencing psychosis and to support them to get the most from their treatment.



The role of family and friends in the headspace Youth Early Psychosis Program

Working collaboratively with family and friends of young people is a core component of the **headspace** Youth Early Psychosis Program (hYEPP). The staff you will meet in the program all understand that family and friends play a vital role in the lives of young people. They are committed to helping you understand psychosis, treatment goals to cope and adjust to the young person's illness, and to minimise the impact on family life.



Support for friends and family can be provided in a number of ways over the course of a young person's time with the program:



The young person's case manager and treating team can provide information and support in person and over the phone



Family peer support workers can provide support and advice drawn from their personal experience of supporting a young person with psychosis



The case manager or a specialist family worker may provide one or more family sessions focused on a particular goal or intervention



Group sessions may be offered with other families and friends involved in the program



Referrals to external agencies or support services might be made by staff, depending on your particular needs

Your involvement in treatment

In the **headspace** Youth Early Psychosis Program, your involvement will be encouraged wherever possible. However, keep in mind that staff need to balance your involvement with the young person's wishes and maintaining their trust and confidentiality.



Once your young person has been allocated a case manager and doctor, you may find it useful to:

Talk with your young person and the treating team about how you can be involved and to what extent.

Find out who is in the treating team, what their roles are, and who the best person is to keep in touch with.

Make a list of questions to take with you when you meet the treating team, and feel free to write down the answers at the meeting. If you don't understand something that's being discussed, let the team know.

Try to think of yourself and the treating team as having the same goal: to help your young person with psychosis recover. It can be like a partnership between yourself and the treating team.

Ask where you can find more information. For example, are there specific information sessions you can attend about psychosis, or materials that you can take away to read?

If a young person is worried about sharing information, the treating team will aim to come up with a plan for involvement that meets the needs of the young person and their family and friends. This plan can be revisited over time, and any reluctance for family involvement will be explored and re-evaluated.



How do I relate to my young person while they're unwell?

Spending time with a person who is experiencing psychotic symptoms may feel frightening or confusing. They might behave in unusual ways, or say things that don't make sense. It's important to remember that they are still your son, daughter, brother, sister, wife, husband, partner or friend. It is very difficult for a person who is very ill to behave as they usually would.

Often families and friends ask how they should behave and talk to a person who is psychotic. There are no set rules; however some general guidelines can be helpful.

- Take care of yourself. Try to find a balance between care and concern and not getting too run down.
- Be yourself.
- Try to get an understanding of what's going on for the young person in order to better understand their behaviour or concerns. They may behave and talk differently due to the psychotic symptoms.
- Understand that psychotic symptoms are stressful for everyone and that you may have a range of feelings such as shock, fear, sadness, anger, frustration, despair. Talking to other people may help you to deal with these feelings.
- When a young person is very unwell, they may need extra support and care. Sometimes they need to be in a safe, comforting environment and sometimes they need others to help with decisions.
- Try not to take it personally if the person says hurtful words to you when they are unwell.
- When a person has psychotic symptoms they may seem fixed in their beliefs and ideas. Don't get involved in long disagreements, but try to listen in order to gain an understanding of their current reality and to show empathy.
- Remember there is a good chance of recovery, even if it takes some time. Be patient and hopeful.



How can I support recovery?

Family and friends are really important in the process of recovery. When a person is recovering from their psychotic episode you can provide love, stability, understanding and reassurance, as well as help with practical issues.



However, you may need your own period of recovery and adjustment to all that has happened. It can be useful to understand some of the stages you may have gone through.

It may be useful to get in touch with family and carer support agencies, such as ARAFEMI, Mental Illness Fellowship or Carers Australia.



Common Stages

It's common for families and friends to go through the following stages:

1 At first you may be in crisis as you become aware that something serious is happening to your young person. You may feel very anxious, worried and frightened.

2 As it becomes clearer that something is not quite right, you start to seek help. This is also a time where you may be adjusting to the fact that your family member or friend is unwell and the situation cannot be left to recover by itself.

3 As you find help you will probably have lots of questions and worries: What is happening? Is it psychosis? What causes it? Will this happen again? How is it treated? What can we do to help? What will we tell other people? Will our young person understand that they need help? Should we have got help earlier?

You might have mixed emotions and reactions during this time and any feelings you have are OK.

4 As the young person begins to recover and starts to show signs of being well, you may experience great relief. You may also have started to understand the illness more by this time and start to feel more hopeful about the future.

5 As recovery progresses and things start to get back to normal, you may find your anxiety, questions or worries start to increase again.

Often family members find themselves watching the person for signs of relapse or strange behaviour. You may feel protective and anxious, wanting the person to be well as quickly as possible. It can be difficult balancing the young person's need for independence and your desire to provide protection and care.

6 As recovery continues, there is a gradual adjustment for everyone. You might be feeling reassured that recovery is happening and start to see some normality returning to your life. You may want to speak with your young person about psychosis, what it has been like for everyone and how to support each other in the future.

Remember that families and friends also need a period of recovery and time to understand and accept what has happened. Don't keep things a secret. It can be really helpful to talk with other people, whether this is with family members, friends or professionals.



For further information and support:

ARAFEMI

www.arafemi.org.au
ARAFEMI Mind Carer helpline
(9am – 5pm Monday to Friday):
1300 550 265

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia

www.mifa.org.au
National helpline: 1800 985 944

Mental Illness Fellowship

www.mifellowship.org
Helpline (9am – 5pm Monday to Friday): (03) 8486 4222
Available in VIC, TAS and ACT

Carers Australia

www.carersaustralia.com.au
National helpline: 1800 242 636



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