

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Keeps Psychosis Going?



Description

It is surprisingly common to see or hear things that other people don't, or to hold beliefs that other people might find unusual. If you keep hearing voices or seeing things that aren't there (in a way which causes you distress, and prevents you from living your life as you want), you may be experiencing psychosis. Psychosis can cause a wide spectrum of experiences which include:

- Hearing voices or sounds that no-one else can hear.
- Seeing, feeling, smelling or tasting things that others can't.
- Holding unusual beliefs that others around you do not share.
- Struggling to think or concentrate. (You may come across as muddled to others.)
- Acting strangely or unpredictably. (Your behavior may seem unusual to others.)
- Struggling to do daily activities such as working, studying, or caring for yourself.
- Feeling disconnected. (You may not feel emotions as strongly as you used to.)

Research studies have shown that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a helpful psychological therapy for psychosis. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

In 2001, clinical psychologist Anthony Morrison published a model of psychosis which describes some of the 'parts' that keep psychosis going. The *What Keeps Psychosis Going?* information handout describes some of the key factors which act to maintain psychosis. It illustrates them in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about these processes is an essential part of cognitive therapy for psychosis. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

Instructions

Suggested Question



One interesting way of thinking about psychosis is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people keep experiencing symptoms of psychosis. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?

References

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What Keeps Psychosis Going?

Unusual thoughts and beliefs are a key part of experiencing psychosis. For example, you may see a police car and believe "The police are after me", or you might have a thought and think "That thought wasn't mine."

The way you make sense of the world around you can make you very worried about your own safety or the safety of others. Interpreting things in threatening ways can also make you more likely to behave in ways to 'get safe', which can prevent you from living your life as you would like.

Interpreting triggers in unusual and threatening ways

People who experience psychosis often hold particular beliefs, for example:

- I'm vulnerable.
- I'm special.
- People are trying to hurt me.
- Worrying keeps me safe.

These beliefs might have been shaped by traumatic or difficult life experiences. They can make you feel threatened and unsafe by affecting:

- How you make sense of the world around you.
- How you interpret things that happen to you.
- Your emotions.

Your past, your beliefs, and assumptions

What keeps it going?

Psychosis

Attention biases and thought control strategies

If you have psychosis, you may try to control your thoughts as a way of managing how distressed you feel. You might find that your focus of attention is 'pulled' towards more negative or threatening parts of your experience. These strategies are intended to keep you safe, but they can worsen your experiences of psychosis and keep it going. They can prevent you from finding out what is actually happening.

Safety behaviors and avoidance

If your unusual thoughts and beliefs lead you to feel threatened or unsafe, you might avoid situations that make you feel scared. You might also do things to control your surroundings – psychologists call these safety behaviors.

Safety behaviors and avoidance are well-intentioned, but can lead to a lot of problems:

- They can prevent you from learning the true facts about a situation.
- They can lead to the result that you were trying to prevent.
- They can draw attention to you.
- They can hold you back from daily activities.

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