

What Can Friends and Family Do to Help Someone Recover from Psychosis?

Introduction

Psychosis is a very individual experience and there is no magic formula to guarantee that everyone involved will emerge unscathed. The right kind of professional help is extremely beneficial in aiding recovery. The person with psychosis can play an active part and support from their friends and family will be especially important.

The leaflet below outlines some specific suggestions for practical ways of helping someone who is or has experienced psychotic symptoms both during an acute episode and in the longer term. They have been proposed by someone who has personal experience of psychosis and could be used either while waiting to receive professional help or alongside treatment. Try to adapt them to suit your situation and the needs and preferences of the person you are trying to help.

Surviving a Psychotic Episode

This can be very frightening for both the person experiencing psychosis and those around them, especially while waiting to receive professional help. A person with psychosis is likely to be experiencing distorted perceptions and disorganised thoughts. As a result they may be restless and agitated or listless and withdrawn, sometimes alternating between these states. Their behaviour may be erratic and they may be difficult to communicate with.

If things have got to this stage the role friends and family is very important as the nature of psychosis means that they may be vulnerable and need a great deal of support at this time.

What Friends and Family Can Do

However hard it may be, try to view this episode as a difficult period that the person needs help to get through, rather than an unfortunate part of their personality or something they have deliberately done to be difficult.

Act calm, any displayed sense of alarm may feed into the person's own anxiety and sense that something is wrong. This in turn can make any stress related symptoms worse.

Supporting someone with psychosis can be difficult emotionally. Although it may be difficult, try to keep your own feelings away from them. Go away from them and seek your own emotional support elsewhere (e.g your own friends and family, health professionals and carers groups).

Be as open and honest as possible, speaking slowly and simply and maintaining eye contact. A person experiencing psychosis could be

confused, frightened and unsure what is real or who to trust. They are likely to respond best and feel safest with those who treat them in this way.

Explain who any health professional visitors are and the purpose of any essential appointments. Repeat this several times if need be and write it down in a clear and

simple way. Leave the information in a fixed place which is easy to return to e.g stuck on a notice board, fridge etc. Use the same principal with any other important information. This may help the person experiencing psychotic symptoms to get their bearings and feel reassured even if they are unable to take all the information on board.

If someone is clearly disorganised and confused try to keep their environment safe, secure, clean and uncluttered. Try to make it as relaxing and un-stimulating as possible without making it seem unfamiliar. Keep lights low, turn off the TV, remove newspapers or magazines or any other sources of images that the suffer finds upsetting. Reduce noise such as vacuuming and DIY. If necessary unplug the phone or turn the ring off. If someone is stressed out by distorted perceptions this could help.

Encouraging them to remain in such a safe environment could help prevent physical injury or damage to reputation but it is important not to make them feel forced against their will.

Contact the person's work, place of study and key friends or family who may be concerned about them. Explain they are unwell, help is being sought and that you will keep them informed. Find out what sick notes etc are required for work, college or benefits and talk to the professionals about getting them. Be especially careful not to give too many details to an employer as exactly what they need to be told can be negotiated later.

Try to involve the person experiencing psychotic symptoms as much as possible in any decisions that will affect them.

Until help arrives try to encourage the person with psychosis to eat, wash and sleep, although accept that this may be erratic.

While you may need to arrange shifts to stay with the person keep numbers of visitors at any one time to a minimum. Brief visitors before hand and speak with them calmly and openly in front of the person experiencing psychosis. Any suspicions they may have about people around them may be made worse by unfamiliar faces and whispering behind closed doors.

Be available if the person wants to you and listen to what they say. Even if it sounds like nonsense look for any themes which might reveal their concerns and discuss this with the health professionals. Be careful not to pry too much as it could aggravate the situation.

Ask the person to read out loud to you but be careful to choose emotionally neutral material with simple words.

If you ask the person to keep some notes about how they are feeling explain before hand if you plan to show them to anyone else. Making notes may help calm and distract the person experiencing psychosis, occupy them in a non destructive way and provide useful information about what they are thinking and feeling. Do not take their private notes and give it to doctors as this will break their trust, aggravate anxiety and may not provide a true reflection of what they need help for.

When the psychotic person is seen by a medical professional for the first time they may be asked to take sedative medication. They may be very suspicious of this. Be as open as you can about explaining the purpose of the medication e.g 'it will help you get some sleep so you can wake up tomorrow feeling better'. You may need to do this several times before they are convinced. An emotional plea could set them on edge.

Recovering From Psychosis

Once the acute episode has been dealt with, friends and family can do a lot to provide the right conditions and support for someone to recover from psychosis and regain control over their life.

Treat them like you would a friend who had experienced a recent stressful life event such as relationship difficulties, job loss etc and is emotionally sensitive as a result.

Suggest activities the person may enjoy and join in with them, e.g walk, dinner, trip to cinema etc.

It first you could help them become more independent by accompanying them on essential trips e.g shopping and giving them lifts to and from places.

Help make their surroundings cheerful, clean and calming, buy flowers, cards etc

Ask about their treatment be aware of appointments, medication etc and support them with it

Be aware of how they may be affected by medication side effects so you can spot if anything is amiss.

Keep a note of what you think is and isn't helping, raise issues with professionals.

Seek support for any of your own emotional issues elsewhere, so you don't burden the person recovering with anything they may not be ready to cope with yet.

Discuss issues that will affect them as openly and honestly as you can and involve them in decisions.

Listen to their concerns.

Let them know you value their opinion and take them seriously although it is O.K to say you don't agree with something they say. If you do want to question them on something do it gently so they don't get defensive or insecure.

Don't put too much pressure on the person but encourage them to do things for themselves.

Support them to undertake essential activities such as paying bills, arranging repairs etc.

Be concerned and know where they are and what they are up to but try to trust them and not constantly check up on them, prevent them from doing things or treat them like a small child

Try not to get angry or frustrated with them or make them feel like they have failed, are not good enough or are less capable than other people. They are just someone who needs a break and some help and support to get back on track.

Do your own research, join support groups and lobby to help get the person the best support and care to suit their individual circumstances.