

Supporting Older Adults Who Experience Delusions and Hallucinations



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It can be scary when a loved one begins showing unexpected signs of mental illness in older age.^{1,2}

This is especially true when those symptoms are not well understood, as might be the case with delusions and hallucinations.

What is Psychosis?

Psychosis is a mental disorder that includes symptoms such as:

- **Delusions:** strongly believing in something that isn't true or real³
- **Hallucinations:** seeing, hearing, or sensing something that isn't real³

People experiencing psychosis are disconnected from reality and have thoughts that become distorted.^{3,4} This is a serious mental disorder that requires immediate attention from a mental health professional.^{1,2}

Psychosis also includes other symptoms, such as^{3,6,7}:

- being paranoid or suspicious without reason
- feeling agitated and disoriented
- disorganized thinking and speech
- sudden and exaggerated changes in mood

The person may experience changes in the way they think, act, and feel. Often, they have no idea that what's happening is unusual or that they should get help.^{2,6,8}

Is Psychosis Common in Older Adults?

Delusions and hallucinations are more common in older adults than in the general population.⁶ About 5% of people older than 65 will experience psychosis and this increases to 10% for people over 85. As many as 1 in 4 of us will experience at least some symptoms of psychosis in our older years.⁷

Psychosis in older adults tends to be linked to dementia and Alzheimer's disease. About 40% of people with dementia end up experiencing some form of psychosis.^{4,7,9} Delusions typically occur about twice as often as hallucinations.⁹

While dementia is the most powerful predictor of psychosis in older adults, there are other risk factors as well¹⁰:

- As we age, our brains change, and these chemical changes can help explain the late onset of psychosis in some people.^{6,7}
- The risk of psychosis is higher in people who have physical conditions such as thyroid disease, infections, and autoimmune disorders.^{1,8,11}
- Social isolation, depression, and stressful life events have also been connected to the psychosis in older age.^{6,7,10,12}
- Substance use and starting a new medication can lead to symptoms of psychosis.^{2,8,10}
- Women are at higher risk of developing delusions and hallucinations in later life. Men tend to develop these symptoms earlier in life.^{7,12}

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What Are the Warning Signs?

The early stages of psychosis generally include sudden changes in how your loved one thinks and behaves. They may have trouble sleeping, staying still, remembering things, and performing daily tasks. Mood swings are also common.^{1,2,8,9} This can be a chaotic time, and some people with psychosis sometimes harm themselves. If there are worrisome changes in how they are perceiving reality, this could be a sign of psychosis.¹

Delusions often include some form of paranoia or suspicion.⁸ It is common for people with delusional beliefs to think they have been robbed, that a spouse is being unfaithful, or that their house is not truly their home. They may believe you are an imposter or that you will abandon them.¹⁰

Hallucinations are most commonly visual, meaning your loved one is seeing something that isn't there. Auditory hallucinations, like hearing voices, occur as well.¹⁰ Most hallucinations feature people or animals. For example, your loved one might tell you that they saw someone in the house but no one was there. These experiences tend to happen daily or weekly.⁹

How Are Caregivers Affected?

It can be stressful and overwhelming when someone we're caring for develops delusions or hallucinations. Psychosis can interfere with day-to-day functioning, increase the need for support, and put strain on relationships.⁹ Sometimes, the changes that result from psychosis, and the responsibilities of managing them, are so overwhelming that the caregivers end up neglecting the person.⁶

Although delusions and hallucinations can seem disturbing for caregivers, it might help to know that your loved one isn't necessarily as upset about them. About 20% of people report being severely distressed by these symptoms, but it's more common for patients to report mild discomfort (about 40%), or even no discomfort at all (also about 40%).⁹

Don't lose hope. For some, symptoms like delusions and hallucinations may only last for a few months.⁹ Even if psychosis does persist for longer, it's possible to manage this disorder and still feel well into old age.

How Can I Help?

If your loved one is expressing thoughts of suicide, hearing disturbing voices that encourage them to harm themselves or someone else, or showing behaviour that seems out of control, call 911.^{1,2} Ask the dispatcher if there's a mental health crisis team available that can help keep your loved one safe.

Friends, family, and other caregivers will likely be the first to notice if someone is showing signs of delusions or hallucinations. If you're already connected to a psychiatric team, alert them as soon as possible.^{1,2} Consider also taking your loved one for a medical examination, because these symptoms can sometimes be the result of treatable physical conditions.¹

There's no cure for psychosis but treatment options are available, including medications.⁴ A mental health care team can help you and your loved one understand which ones may be best for your situation. Part of your role as a caregiver is to help your loved one feel as safe and comfortable as possible.^{4,13} There are strategies that can help keep your loved one stable:

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How Can I Help? (continued)

- **Validate their feelings.** Remember that no matter how illogical your loved one's experience may seem, their perceptions appear very real to them. Instead of contradicting them, just take a moment to acknowledge what they're going through.¹³
- **Change the subject.** Staying calm and asking follow-up questions about your loved one's experiences can help prevent an argument. Slowly steer the conversation away from their delusions and hallucinations and help them focus on other things.^{4,13}
- **Don't get offended.** Sometimes your loved one may accuse you of something you didn't do or think that you're a stranger. These accusations can be difficult to deal with, but try not to take it personally or get defensive. Acknowledge that it must be scary that they don't recognize you and help them feel safe.¹³
- **Create a routine.** Adding some predictable structure to day-to-day life can help ease symptoms of psychosis and dementia.¹³ Declutter the home, add labels to things, and stay active! Go on walks, plan visits, and keep them engaged in simple activities.⁴
- **Remove triggers.** Avoid things that make their psychosis worse. Try to keep familiar faces around in case your loved one finds strangers stressful. Limit unnecessary noise and minimize reflections. For example, close the shades at night and don't leave the radio on all day.^{4,13}
- **Remove dangerous objects.** If a person is having hallucinations or delusions, it's a good idea to keep dangerous tools or weapons, such as guns and kitchen knives, out of their reach.¹³

What if They Don't Want Help?

People experiencing psychosis often don't recognize that there's a problem. They may be wary of you or not be willing to accept your help. If the person isn't a danger to themselves or others, it's okay for them to decline treatment.²

Instead, do your best to build their trust. Be yourself and stay calm. Avoid intruding on their space, physically or emotionally. Let them feel their feelings. They'll be more likely to listen to your suggestions if you avoid arguing with them.²

Help them schedule and attend appointments if they allow you. Accompany them and provide health professionals with information about symptoms and medications they're taking. If their symptoms escalate and you need to call 911, advocate for them and calmly explain the situation to police to ensure everyone is safe.²

Learning how to recognize the signs of psychosis can help you prepare. Many older adults, especially those with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia, experience symptoms of psychosis as they age.² Have compassion for them. And remember to also have compassion for yourself.

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Where Can I Get More Help?

Resources and supports for psychosis and other mental health problems are available in your community. For more information, connect with any of the following organizations:

- **Canadian Mental Health Association**
<https://ontario.cmha.ca/> 1-800-875-6213
- **Centre for Addiction and Mental Health**
www.camh.ca 1-800-463-2338
- **Community Information Centres**
www.211Ontario.ca Dial 211
- **ConnexOntario:** Contact for 24/7, confidential and free information about mental health, addiction and problem gambling services throughout Ontario.
www.connexontario.ca 1-866-531-2600

Resources

Understanding Psychosis and Finding Help Early.

Canadian Mental Health Association. <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/understanding-psychosis-and-finding-help-early/>

Empowering Families Affected by Psychosis.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. <https://moodle8.camhx.ca/moodle/course/view.php?id=16>: This self-directed online program is designed to offer you support as you care for your loved one.

When a Family Member Chooses Not to Seek Help.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-family-member-is-unwilling-to-seek-help>

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