

THE EARLY PSYCHOSIS INITIATIVE EPI

MINIMIZING DAMAGE – MAXIMIZING OUTCOMES:

The Importance of Early & Effective
Treatments for Psychosis



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

Ministry of Health and
Ministry Responsible for Seniors
Ministry for Children and Families
Ministry of Education

EARLY INTERVENTION

What is Psychosis?

Psychosis is a condition characterized by impairment in reality testing and may involve severe disturbances in perception, cognition, behaviour, and feeling. It is a serious but treatable condition. There are multiple causes of psychosis, which include substance abuse or withdrawal, exposure to severe stress, inherited and acquired medical conditions or diseases, and mood disorders. However, the most common cause of psychosis is schizophrenia. The onset of schizophrenia most often occurs during the late teens or early twenties.

Psychosis Damages Psychosocial Development

Psychosis disrupts a young person's life at a critical stage of social and psychological development. Social development is harmed as symptoms interfere with peer relationships and lead to social isolation. School and work performance declines, and there can be a profound loss of social and economic potential. Family relationships also suffer as both person and family struggle to understand and cope with the changes. Secondary psychiatric problems such as depression and substance abuse often develop. The risk for suicide increases dramatically in people who develop psychoses. Early intervention is important since the longer the illness goes on without proper treatment, the greater the risk the person's psychosocial development will be permanently derailed.

Psychosis and Damage to the Brain

Evidence indicates that delayed treatment may cause the illness to become more biologically entrenched and less responsive to treatment. Structural changes in the brain are common in the early stages of schizophrenia and are often accompanied by disturbances in memory, learning and other cognitive abilities. These negative changes tend to remain stable after the illness has been active for about five years. Some experts believe that episodes of psychosis are biologically dangerous and inflict further damage to the brain with each episode. A window of opportunity may exist when proper treatment maximizes long-term outcomes.

The Importance of Early Intervention

Current interventions are effective and almost every individual will recover from a first episode of psychosis. Early diagnosis and treatment can lead to significantly improved recovery and outcome. By contrast, the longer the illness goes untreated, the longer it takes for remission of symptoms, the lesser the degree of remission, and the greater the chance of early relapse. This underscores the importance of early identification and treatment. Studies show that the duration of untreated schizophrenia (interval between first signs of illness and treatment) is approximately three years. They also show prolonged delays (about a year or more) between onset of acute psychosis and the initiation of appropriate treatment. Because of the damage caused when the early signs of psychosis are ignored, efficient methods must be established throughout the province to ensure that persons are helped as soon as possible. Help must be provided with compassion and respect. Further traumatizing the person will create more problems and can lead to early treatment withdrawal.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF PSYCHOSIS

The onset of psychosis may be abrupt, but typically is preceded by **changes** in functioning that may last for weeks, months or even years. Families and friends usually have a vague but distinct awareness that the person's behaviour has become "unusual" and that the person is "not the same." The number, duration and severity of these signs differ from person to person.

Potential Warning Signs

Many of these behavioural changes are normal responses to stressful events.

Try not to overreact. Stop. Think. Are these behaviours unusually distressing to the individual or impairing their ability to function at home, school or work? Are they disruptive or distressing to others? Have the behaviours persisted for an uncharacteristically long period of time? Persons experiencing the symptoms appearing in bold face type should be monitored very closely as these symptoms are strong warning signs for severe mental illness. If you are concerned do not hesitate to seek help or advice through your physician, Mental Health Centre or other resource in your community.

Behaviours

Feeling refreshed after much less sleep than normal

Deterioration of personal hygiene

Cutting oneself; threats of self-mutilation

Hyperactivity or inactivity-- or alternating between the two

Staring without blinking -- or blinking incessantly

Excessive writing without meaning

Severe sleep disturbances

Agitation

Strange posturing

Bizarre behaviour

Drug or alcohol abuse

Being speeded up for days

Thinking and Speech

Extreme preoccupation with religion or with the occult

Person feels things around them seem changed

Ongoing rapid speech that is difficult to interrupt

Peculiar use of words or odd language structures

Talks much less

Unusual sensitivity to stimuli (noise, light, colours, textures)

Memory Problems

Severe distractibility

Concentration problems

Irrational statements

Hallucinations

Possessing special powers

Social

Severe deterioration of social relationships

Dropping out of activities -- or out of life in general

Sensitivity and irritability when touched by others

Refusal to touch persons or objects; wearing gloves, etc

Social withdrawal, isolation, and reclusiveness

Unexpected aggression

Suspiciousness

A new fear of people

Emotive

Inability to cry or feel joy, or excessive crying

Feelings of depression and anxiety

Emotions not in keeping with a situation or thought

Euphoric mood

Inappropriate laughter

Sustained irritability

Personality

Reckless behaviours that are out of character

Significantly prolonged drop in motivation

Shift in basic personality

THE EARLY PSYCHOSIS INITIATIVE (EPI)

What to do if you suspect someone might be developing psychosis?

The first step is to get educated about psychosis. The next step is to ensure the person is referred to qualified professionals who are able to make a diagnosis and help initiate treatment.

INSERT: REGIONALLY SPECIFIC INFORMATION REGARDING REFERRAL PATHS, CONTACT NAMES AND NUMBERS ETC. CAN BE ENTERED IN THIS SECTION

What is EPI?

EPI is a project aimed at enhancing the recognition of early signs and symptoms of psychosis so that effective treatment can be started as soon as possible. As part of EPI, various health regions in the province will implement strategies aimed at improving service to young persons who are in the early stages of psychosis.

The one-time funding for EPI projects is provided by the Ministry of Health, Province of British Columbia. This one-time funding support, which is being administered by Mheccu, is a component of the bridge funding that the Ministry is providing to support the strategic redevelopment of the mental health systems as articulated in the *Mental Health Plan* and in *Best Practices in Mental Health Reform*.

EPI is an inter-ministry and inter-agency initiative. Partners with the Ministry of Health include the Ministry for Children and Families (MCF) and regional representatives of MCF and regional health authorities, Ministry of Education and regional counseling and special services representatives, the BC Schizophrenia Society and the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Further information on the EPI project including provincial resources can be found on the Mheccu website at www.mheccu.ubc.ca.