Chapter 9

PSYCHOSIS

WHAT IS IT?

A person who suffers from psychosis experiences symptoms that a mentally healthy person can hardly understand. The person seems like he or she has lost touch with reality and, indeed, he or she has. People who do not know much about mental health issues might be scared of the person or make fun of him or her. The psychotic person is very vulnerable and cannot look after himself or herself properly.

Thinking, perceiving, feeling and interpreting of what is going on around a person with psychosis are not like ours.
The main symptoms of psychosis are hallucinations and delusions.

Having hallucinations means the person is seeing, hearing (“voices”) or feeling things that other people will not see, hear or feel.

Delusions are beliefs that are false but feel true to the psychotic person. Delusions can be about the person himself or herself or about others. (A woman might believe that the neighbors want to harm her, a man might be convinced that he is an important person and should be treated.)

Some of our cultural beliefs need to be carefully looked at whether they are not said by a person who is actually suffering from psychosis.
These symptoms are so compelling that the psychotic person will react to them, she or he might speak or act out and be very agitated, sometimes even aggressive.

Psychotic hallucinations and delusions are very scary to the person who is experiencing them so he or she might be terrified, feeling paranoia (big fear) and is probably highly stressed. There is medication that can help stop the psychotic symptoms. This medication is administered by a doctor or nurse.

Often people feel tired of taking medication, also because they might experience side effects, they stop taking it and will eventually relapse. In order to avoid that we have to work with the client on medication adherence and solve all issues around it using PST.

Nothing works as good as the right medication for psychosis. So we have to work with our client so that they agree to take their medication as prescribed!
WHAT CAUSES PSYCHOSIS?

Schizophrenia
Very stressful life events
Substance abuse

SCHIZOPHRENIA

This is a psychiatric disorder that causes a person to have hallucinations and delusions. A person who suffers from schizophrenia needs regular medication (anti-psychotic medication) and support. Patients who suffer from schizophrenia will be needing to take their medication for the rest of their lives. They will need a lot of support to keep taking their medication. They also face stigma in the community. They are being seen as weird and crazy, they might talk to themselves and if they are not looked after they are the often the ones who wander the streets, looking lost and forlorn. This puts them at risk of malnutrition, lack of getting medical care for diseases and becoming victims of violence. They also suffer from social neglect as no one will speak to them. This will make their condition worse. This is why we need to prevent our patients with schizophrenia from relapsing and we need to watch out for those who show first signs of psychosis.

VERY STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS

Very stressful life events can cause a person to experience psychotic symptoms like death of a close family member, trauma such as being exposed to violence, accidents, fire, man made or natural disaster. A woman can also develop post partum psychosis after having given birth, usually within 2 weeks with very sudden onset of a wide range of disorganized symptoms. This illness needs immediate medical attention in order to protect mother and baby from harm. The risk for maternal suicide or infanticide is real!

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Many substances can cause the above described psychotic symptoms and also lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression, depending on what substances a person has taken. It is especially dangerous when a lot of different substances are being taken together. Psychosis can be caused by long-term abuse or due to overdosing and is an acute condition that needs medical care.

These substances can particularly cause psychosis:

- Alcohol
- Amphetamines (cocaine, extasy, crystal meth)
- Opioids (Broncho, Stopayne)
- Hallucinogens
- Sedatives (benzodiazepines, sleeping pills)
- Cannabis
WHAT HAPPENS TO A PERSON WHO DEVELOPS A PSYCHOSIS?

Usually, we notice really fast that someone is being different or acting very strangely. We have lots of words for it in our language... kupenga, kuvhunduka, kurwara nepfungwa- (being crazy, weird, a person has lost his or her marbles).

Often the police are called as people are afraid of the psychotic person and the person is then taken to the hospital under the mental health act. As the person does not understand due to the thinking problems, he or she often does not want to be taken to the hospital.

This can be very scary for the person, he or she might not cooperate as he or she is so overwhelmed by the noise in his or her head. He or she needs to be talked to very calmly and gently. It is of no use to argue about the delusional beliefs. We should also not laugh about what the client tells us although it might sound very strange to us.
Once at the psychiatric hospital, the person is sedated with the help of medication and will most likely sleep a lot. Clients feel quite disorientated when coming out of a psychotic episode. Then they need support and understanding when they slowly calm down.

If the psychosis was caused by substance abuse, the psychotic symptoms will become weaker when the person stops to use the substance. This can take from hours to days as the body recovers from substance poisoning (withdrawal), unless the person has had a history of long abuse of the substances. They might not recover well when they have had long term abuse which makes it so important to help people to stop using substances. The hospital is the best place for the person to be observed and safe while withdrawing from the substance.

HOW CAN WE HELP A PERSON WHO EXPERIENCED PSYCHOSIS?

We will mostly deal with people after their psychotic episode. When they come back from the hospital they need our support. We can help them a lot by teaching them the stabilization techniques. All these clients need to take their medication as prescribed.

**People who are regularly using a substance need to learn how to control their behavior. This can be very difficult for them. So they are always at risk of relapsing.**

Throughout the world, it was found that group support can be very helpful for people to realize that using substances is destroying their lives. We can offer support through the Circle Kubatana Tose. We can invite those clients that have substance issues to come regularly and meet others who face the same problems.

We might even regularly meet with the family members in a special family members of substance users CKT so that they can talk about what it is like for them.
As Friendship Bench we serve the community and we want to make a difference. Many mentally ill people who ended up in prison will be released back into the community. They need us to get their feet back on the ground.

During their imprisonment, they are assessed and stabilized with medication. When they come back to the community, we need to help them to stay stable. We have to make sure they are taking their medication, go regularly to the clinic and always have enough medication at home. The best way to do all this is to see them very often and be very involved in their lives.

We also have to encourage them to be active, to exercise, and to be helpful around the house and go back to work if possible.

And we have to support the families, neighbors and communities to support our clients.

HOW TO SPEAK WITH A PERSON WHO SUFFERS FROM PSYCHOSIS?

We have to understand that the strange behavior is part of a mental disorder. It has nothing to do with being bewitched or cursed. As psychosis means a person loses touch with reality, the people around the ill person need to look out for them. They also need to be educated on how to interact with an ill person.

» Talk to the ill person calmly and with respect.
» Avoid arguing the strange beliefs (they might continue with their beliefs although all other symptoms have disappeared).
» Encourage them to engage in activities (household chores and any other tasks).
FIRST SIGNS OF DEVELOPING PSYCHOSIS OR RELAPSING INTO A PSYCHOTIC EPISODE

We teach the family and community members, when someone shows the first symptoms of acting strangely:

» Avoid too much stress and chaos around the person.
» Make sure they have enough food, water and sleep.
» Reduce stress and chaos around them.
» Take them to the clinic or alert the lay health worker who is looking after the ill person so she or he can call for adequate help.

Part of our work as lay health worker is to bring awareness to our communities. We understand better now that psychosis is an illness of the brain that causes the ill person to lose touch with reality. We will encourage our communities to stop mistreating mentally ill people.

We shall not allow them to be threatened, locked up, chained, beaten, neglected, or suffer any other form of abuse.

We will tell everybody in our community that these ill people must have the proper medical care and that this care is available at the local Polyclinic.

It is best to not let these ill people take any other treatment (i.e. herbal remedies) as it can interfere with the prescribed medication.

Mentally ill people have rights too. We need to treat them with respect. Even if they are difficult to deal with and annoy us sometimes.