

ASK AN EXPERT

KRISTIN HARTSAW, CERTIFIED MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID INSTRUCTOR

What is important to know about psychosis?

Although psychosis occurs much less frequently than other mental health conditions, the destructive acts associated with extreme cases of the disease often overshadow its small rate of incidence.

"It tends to be what people think of first when they think of mental illness," said Kristin Hartsaw of the DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform. "It's not as common as depression or anxiety."

Psychosis occurs when a person loses contact with reality, often characterized by delusions or hallucinations, she said. People suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder may experience the condition. Psychosis can also be drug-induced or a byproduct of dementia.

"The psychotic episode is usually due to another psychological disorder," Hartsaw said. "Usually what we see is severe disturbances with their emotions or their behavior."

To simulate the condition for mental health first aid trainees, two people try to have a conversation while third person whispers different voices in their ears.

"What we hear is how difficult it was

to concentrate on the conversation they were having," she said.

The difficulty of trying to hold down a job and perform other societal functions with the disorder is formidable, Hartsaw remarked.

But because this category of mental illness is not a constant state, like cancer or diabetes, proper treatment can be elusive.

"It's episodic. With bipolar, they can have long periods of time where they are well," she said. "It's not until an episode occurs that there's a disruption."

Proper intervention and support can help short-circuit an episode from progressing to the psychotic, Hartsaw said.

She referred to the acronym ALGEE that trainees learn as a guide to intervention.

"Assess for risk of suicide or harm," she said of the first step. "Listening and providing nonjudgmental response is next, and that can be challenging."

That should be followed, as the situation allows, by giving reassurance and support and then encouraging professional help or self-help strategies. Those can include group therapy, faith-based counseling or other treatment. Express your concern, but try to let that person set the tone and lead the conversation," she said. Speak clearly using short sentences, and interact without indulging the person's delusions, and try to elimi-

FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH

This is one of a series presented in partnership with Community Memorial Foundation on the five major forms of mental illness.

nate distractions from the scene.

"It may be as simple as trying to move them away to somewhere more quiet," Hartsaw said.

Studies show that most people with schizophrenia or bipolar experience their first episode between ages 15 and 25. Postpartum depression is another condition that has shown potential for psychotic behavior.

"It really does depend on what the underlying disorder is," Hartsaw said, stressing that violent acts are not common outcomes. "It's a very small percentage of people that threaten violence."

She urged people to keep in mind that mental illness is medical and said being a positive presence in all seasons for people with mental illness can help mitigate the rough periods.

"Supporting that person when they're well goes a long way," Hartsaw said.

— by Ken Knutson



Mental health first aid instructor Kristin Hartsaw said the inconsistent nature of mental disorders like psychosis can make responding a trial-and-error process. "What's hard is finding a treatment that's successful. People often try a combination of strategies to address it." (photo courtesy of Kristin Hartsaw)

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