

# Getting Help Early for Psychosis

## Navigators Guide



Supporting a person with early psychosis can be distressing and confusing for relatives and friends. Families may experience severe disruption in their normal routine of family life and be unsure how best to respond to signs of mental illness. Families and friends may also have a number of questions about what is happening for their family member but need guidance as to how to access and accept appropriate help.

### What is Psychosis?<sup>1</sup>

The word **psychosis** is used to describe conditions where there has been some loss of contact with reality. Psychosis can lead to changes in mood and thinking and to abnormal ideas making it hard to understand how the person thinks and feels. The characteristic symptoms include thought disorder, false beliefs, hallucinations, changed feelings and bizarre behaviour. When someone becomes ill in this way, it is called a psychotic episode.

**Early or first-episode psychosis** simply refers to the first time that someone experiences psychotic symptoms. People experiencing a first-episode psychosis may not understand what is happening to them. The symptoms can be highly disturbing and completely unfamiliar, leaving the person frightened, confused and distressed.

### Why Early Intervention is Important?

Intervention in the early stage of the illness can be vital in minimising disruption to the young person's development and in reducing the duration and severity of their psychotic symptoms. By linking in with health

services such as GP, mental health services and specialist early psychosis services your family member can gain a greater understanding of mental illness, relapse prevention and stress management.

Within Hunter New England Mental Health Service people with early psychosis may be supported by clinicians from local mental health services<sup>2</sup>, clinicians from a specialist early psychosis service, the local community health centre or other health providers such as GPs.

### Specialist Early Psychosis Services

#### *Northern Region*

*(Tamworth & Armidale)*

An **Early Psychosis Officer** based in Armidale provides education and consultation to care coordinators and mental health staff, supporting people with early psychosis and their families. They assist and advise clinicians to complete a thorough bio-psycho-social assessment, plan care and where requested provide short-term intervention. A capacity building approach is taken that supports the skill development of mental health staff to work effectively with early psychosis issues.

**Talk to your local Community Mental Health Service.<sup>3</sup> If urgent, contact Central Intake Ph 1300 669 757**

#### *Manning Region*

*(Taree & Forster)*

An **Early Psychosis Officer** based in Taree provides bio-psycho-social assessment, assertive care coordination and support to people experiencing early psychosis.

<sup>1</sup> From 'What is Early Psychosis' Fact Sheet, Early Psychosis and Prevention Centre (EPPIC), 2006

<sup>2</sup> See Community Mental Health Services NG3

<sup>3</sup> See Community Mental Health Services NG3



They also provide education and consultation to families, carers, mental health clinicians and workers from various government and non-government service providers such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Drug and Alcohol programs, Juvenile Justice, Aboriginal Health and GPs. Referrals come from both within and outside the mental health service.

**Early Psychosis Officer (Manning Region) Ph 02 6592 9693**

**Southern Region**

*(Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Maitland & Hunter Valley)*

As in the Northern and Manning Regions of HNE Mental Health, people experiencing early psychosis, are supported by local community mental health teams. There are specialist services such as **Psychological Assistance Service (PAS)** and **Support Through Early Psychosis Service (STEPS)** that can assist with assessment and recovery.

**Psychological Assistance Service**

**PAS** is for young people (under 18 yrs) typically when things don't feel right. They may have just had their first experience of depression or psychosis, or could be at increased risk of developing psychotic symptoms. PAS offers comprehensive assessment and individual treatment provided by a team, including a consultant psychiatrist, psychiatry registrar, clinical nurse specialist and psychologists.

**PAS (Newcastle) Ph 02 4925 7800**

**Support Through Early Psychosis Service**

**STEPS** assists young adults aged 18-30 years to recover specifically from early psychosis, develop new skills and interests, increase confidence, develop personal strengths and relationships, and make plans for the future.

Group and individual centre-based recovery programs are provided by occupational therapy and psychology staff. Some of the programs available include education about psychosis and relapse prevention, regaining social confidence, getting ready for work/study and managing stress. STEPS supports mental health clinicians in other regions to work effectively with early psychosis issues, providing education and consultation.

Family members and friends may also access **Family and Friends Information** sessions on psychosis, medication, symptoms and recovery. These groups run several times a year, in a range of locations in the Hunter region. Sessions are run by STEPS clinicians and include input from medical staff.

**STEPS (Newcastle) Ph 02 4915 1796**

**Web Resources**

**EPPIC** - Early Psychosis and Prevention Centre [www.eppic.org.au](http://www.eppic.org.au) Information on psychosis and support provided by family & friends.

**Early Psychosis Australia** - [www.earlypsychosis.org](http://www.earlypsychosis.org)

**AUSEINET** - Australian Early Intervention Network [www.auseinet.com](http://www.auseinet.com) Information for consumers, family, carers, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders, general public on promotion, prevention, early intervention, includes *Recovery Online Toolkit*.

**NSW Health Consumer Information Family Help Kit** available at: [www.health.nsw.gov.au/health-public-affairs/familyhelpkit/](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/health-public-affairs/familyhelpkit/) includes material on psychosis.

**NSW Mental Health Association** – [www.mentalhealth.asn.au](http://www.mentalhealth.asn.au) Wide range of Fact Sheets on mental illness