



# First Episode Psychosis: How Schools can Support Students

First Episode Psychosis (FEP) often occurs when youth are still in school. FEP can create a downward trajectory for the person experiencing the illness, including disruptions at school that may lead to reduced academic achievement and school drop-out. Fortunately, better outcomes are possible with greater awareness, earlier interventions, and coordinated care that involves education supports.

## What is psychosis?

Psychosis is a broad term that describes the symptoms that occur at the onset of a serious mental illness like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Psychosis is generally characterized as the person losing contact with reality, with symptoms including hallucinations, confused thoughts, changed behavior, and false beliefs or delusions.<sup>1</sup>

## What is First Episode Psychosis?

First Episode Psychosis refers to the first time someone experiences psychosis symptoms or a psychotic episode. FEP begins with a “prodromal” phase, which is a gradual period of non-specific changes to feelings and behaviors. In this phase, the person might experience depressed mood, difficulty focusing or screening out distractions, feelings of being overwhelmed or disconnected, and other behavioral changes. This period can last for several months to more than a year before the person transitions to the “acute” period, during which they experience the psychotic symptoms described above.

## How does experiencing First Episode Psychosis affect a young person’s life?

FEP can be frightening and isolating for the person experiencing it. People who have experienced FEP say they especially struggle with confronting stigma, not being taken seriously by others, and not knowing what the future holds or how to continue school.<sup>2</sup> People with FEP may withdraw from others or have trouble communicating with others, potentially leading to violence against themselves or others or clashes with authority. In addition, people with FEP may not believe that they are experiencing mental



illness, which can make it more difficult to help them seek treatment. FEP and psychotic disorders can also lead to accumulating disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

## Why is First Episode Psychosis an issue for young people in particular?

FEP is an important issue for those working with youth because the peak onset period for psychotic disorders is between ages 15 and 25, with more than half of psychotic disorders appearing before the early 20s. Without intervention, FEP and psychotic disorders can be highly disruptive to a young person’s academic and social development.<sup>5</sup>

In the U.S., approximately 100,000 youth and young adults experience FEP each year.

## How can First Episode Psychosis be prevented or treated?

Primary prevention of psychosis is not currently possible, because the biological and environmental factors that cause psychosis are not fully understood. Fortunately, research has shown that early intervention during FEP can improve symptoms, promote recovery, and positively influence outcomes. Early intervention in psychosis (EIP) is a community- and recovery-based secondary prevention approach.

EIP involves medical interventions like therapy and medication, as well as other more comprehensive services that support positive social and school lives for people experiencing FEP. These supports allow more youth to live independently, continue pursuit of their goals, and recover more quickly with fewer hospitalization days.<sup>7</sup>

Coordinated specialty care (CSC) is a kind of EIP that specifically targets youth. CSC is designed to be culturally competent, person-centered, and age-appropriate. An important aspect of this holistic approach to FEP intervention is that it is a team-based approach that includes the youth (and family, when appropriate) as a decision-maker in his or her own treatment. Empowering the young person experiencing FEP as an active collaborator is designed to help prevent or postpone relapse.<sup>8,9</sup>

### What are the warning signs of psychosis?<sup>6</sup>

- Perception, thinking, and speech changes (e.g., rapid and difficult to interpret speech, irrational statements, unusual sensitivity to stimuli, memory problems, severe distractibility)
- Social changes (e.g., decline of social relationships, dropping out of activities, withdrawal and isolation, unexpected aggression, extreme suspicion)
- Emotional changes (e.g., depression, anxiety, personality changes, inappropriate laughter, elated mood, inability to express joy)
- Behavioral changes (e.g., odd behavior, cutting and self-mutilation, hyperactivity or inactivity, agitation, sleep disturbances, difficulties functioning at school)

### How can schools help?

Schools can be an ideal place to promote better mental health in students, including those experiencing FEP.

- **Promote mental health literacy.** Schools can build awareness of indicators of mental health concerns and the early signs of psychosis. This can be done by promoting mental health literacy of staff, administrators, and community members through courses such as Youth Mental Health First Aid, which is designed to enhance the ability of educators to appropriately identify students in need of mental health supports and make appropriate referrals. By educating school staff on the signs of FEP and how to make mental health referrals, they will be better equipped to intervene and ensure that students obtain appropriate supports.
- **Improve student access to care.** Schools can lead coordination of efforts to bring youth-serving agencies together to provide youth and families access to appropriate services. Through school-based mental health centers or coordination with community-based providers, schools can ensure that students experiencing FEP are identified early on and have access to care designed to intervene early. In addition, schools can be a source of mental health supports for students who may not otherwise have access to care.
- **Provide supports for students experiencing psychosis.** Finally, schools can increase the likelihood that students experiencing FEP are able to successfully remain in school by providing appropriate supports and participating in the coordinated care being provided to students. Resuming or staying in school is often a goal for students experiencing FEP. Schools can support this goal by being involved in coordinated care and ensuring that students have what they need to succeed.

### Psychosis and School Functioning

Youth experiencing psychosis may face problems with functioning well in school. Psychosis can interfere with academic performance for many reasons, including hallucinations, delusions of reference (i.e., when a natural event is believed to have a special and personal meaning; e.g., believing a public billboard is sending a message directly to you), and paranoid thinking. These symptoms can make it hard to focus on school work and may be distressing to students. Unfortunately, these problems, if left unaddressed, often lead to dropping out of school.

## You Need to Know:

# Schools can impact student mental health for the better



An estimated **3 in 100** people will experience psychosis in their lives.<sup>10</sup>

# 50%

Half of psychosis cases emerge before the early 20s.<sup>11</sup> With treatment, most people will ultimately transition to the “recovery” period, and many may never experience another episode.<sup>12,13</sup>

Schools that facilitate “pathways to care”—including access to mental health services, a coordinated approach to making mental health referrals, and promotion of knowledge and skills about mental health problems—are able to improve student mental health.<sup>14</sup>

An abundance of research has demonstrated how education support can help decrease symptoms of psychosis and promote recovery.<sup>15</sup>



In a survey of over 1,200 people who had experienced psychosis, the most common answer to the question “who was most helpful to you?” was “no one” (22.2%). Less than 2% said a teacher.<sup>16</sup>



People who are diagnosed and treated earlier experience great improvement in quality of life and health.<sup>17</sup>

Individuals who have experienced psychosis described high school counseling centers as one of the most helpful resources.<sup>16</sup>



In that same survey of over 1,200 individuals who experienced psychosis, over 50% reported difficulties with managing school.<sup>16</sup>



Benefits of early intervention include more rapid recovery and better prognosis, lower risk of relapse and of suicide, decreased need for hospitalization, better work and school attendance, and reduced disruption to family and social life.<sup>18</sup>

### Now Is The Time Project AWARE (NITT-PA): Supporting Students Through Improved Access

In 2014, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration funded 20 State Education Agencies through the NITT-PA grant initiative. NITT-PA seeks to intervene with the factors that contribute to school failure for young people with under- or untreated mental illness through mental health promotion, mental illness prevention, and early intervention. In partnership with other youth-serving sectors, Project AWARE grantees are building capacity of educators to address the mental health needs of the youth they serve by improving awareness of mental health indicators, providing training in how to properly identify and respond to mental health concerns, and by improving service systems that connect young people and their families to affordable, developmentally, aligned, and culturally- and linguistically-appropriate resources in their communities.

## Endnotes

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