

PSYCHOTIC DISORDERS IN ADOLESCENTS: SYMPTOMS, TREATMENTS AND RECOVERY

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ABSTRACT

Psychosis is a serious mental illness that causes individuals to experience a reduced quality of life, while in severe cases, they can be harmful to both themselves and to others around them. When psychotic conditions manifest in adolescents, it also impairs their development. Early treatment of psychosis can significantly offset the damaging effects of this mental disease, especially among younger people. Unfortunately, there is limited information regarding psychosis in adolescents. This has caused a lack of understanding regarding this cognitive disorder, causing psychotic conditions in adolescents to often be overlooked by their guardians. This paper serves as tool for better understanding of this mental illness. Besides listing out the symptoms for identifying this disease, the current treatments available are also observed. It was found that more development is needed in the prescription drugs for psychotic conditions for adolescents, as the only ones available currently were developed for adults. Furthermore, the recovery process for these adolescents was plagued by prevalent societal stigma. Hence, it is obvious that more public awareness regarding this mental illness is necessary. There was also a very interesting observation in adolescents recovering from psychosis, as they were found to view their mental conditions positively.

Keywords: Psychosis, Schizophrenia, Major depressive disorder, Bipolar disorder and Brief psychotic disorder.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological problems are known to have adverse effects on the wider health and development of adolescents. Common psychological conditions in adolescence, such as anxiety disorders, depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), is commonly acknowledge to be a vital concern by both the general public and psychiatrists. This is reflective in the vast amount of research and literature available regarding these psychological problems among adolescents. However, people generally tend to overlook psychotic disorders among adolescents when considering psychological conditions, although the effects of psychosis can be extremely damaging and distressing to juveniles.

Psychosis is a mental health problem that can be best described as a “loss of contact with reality”, as it causes sufferers to perceive or interpret things differently from those around them. People with psychosis, often referred to as psychotic, suffer from disruption in perception, thinking, emotion and behaviour. Its most common symptoms include hallucinations, delusions and formal thought disorders. It is important to note that an isolated psychotic symptom is not sufficient to diagnose a person to be having psychotic disorder, making the differential diagnosis of psychosis rather extensive. The occurrence of psychotic disorders and its symptoms have been extensively studied in adults; unfortunately there is a relative lacking of research on how often these syndromes and symptoms are present in adolescents. As of to date, specific prevalence rates for psychosis among adolescents is unknown. However, it is widely accepted that these disorders are less prevalent among adolescents when compared to adults.

As mentioned earlier, the symptoms of psychosis can be quite varied, while the variance in its diagnosis is substantial. Furthermore, there is a severe lacking in research for psychotic conditions among adolescents. For these reasons, accurately diagnosing youngsters whom are suffering from psychotic symptoms is extremely difficult. Besides that, there are several complications that arise even when adolescents are recovering from this mental disease, ranging from lack of properly developed

prescription drugs to societal stigma. Regardless, early treatment for psychotic conditions is important to ensure that the youngster does not experience the damaging effects too severely. The only way this is possible is by guardians being able to determine if the adolescents are exhibiting any of the known psychotic symptoms.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF PSYCHOSIS IN ADOLESCENTS

Although the symptoms of psychosis can vary among sufferers, there are certain general symptoms that indicate the possibility of psychotic disorders among adolescents. An isolated psychotic symptom doesn't necessarily mean that the individual is suffering from psychosis, as it could also be caused by other psychological problems. Therefore, it is important for guardians of adolescents to immediately seek professional help if any of these symptoms are exhibited by the youngster.

Hallucinations

According to Findling et al., (2001), hallucinations can be defined as "a sensory perception that has a compelling sense of reality of a true perception, but occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ". This means that hallucinations can cause the distortion in sensation of any of the five human senses, although most common hallucinations are auditory and visual. Hallucinations are the most commonly observed symptom of psychosis. Psychotic patients have typically described hearing voices, either inside or outside of the head, and seeing a variety of visual images. While there also have been instances of psychotic sufferers to hallucinate smelling noxious or unwanted odour, tasting unpleasant substances and also the sensation of bugs crawling on or under the skin. It has to be noted that neurological conditions may also lead adolescents to experiencing these hallucination. As neurological conditions can be as harmful as psychosis, it is important that guardians do not dismiss any symptoms of hallucinations that adolescents might be experiencing.

Delusions

Findling et al., (2001) defines delusions as "a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary". Delusions, unlike hallucinations, are arbitrary or interpretational according to the individual conducting the observation. This is because the delusional is often used in a daily context to describe individuals who have "far-fetching" ideas or believes. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between delusions and overvalued ideas. Overvalued ideas can be best described as illogical or unusual believes that the individuals usually belief due to culturally supported beliefs, such as witchcraft. Delusions therefore are outside the realm of culturally accepted believes that can be best described as bizarre.

Delusions in the context of psychosis can be the belief that one's private thoughts are being projected outward so that others have access to them, something psychologists refer to as thought broadcasting. When considering youths, some have been found to be delusional to the idea that another individual of higher social or economic level, is in love with him or her. This delusion is referred to as erotomania, as is commonly dismissed by adults when witnessed in adolescents due to them perceiving it as "harmless imagination". Another common delusion experienced among psychotic adolescents is delusional jealousy, which is the unshakable conviction that one's boyfriend or girlfriend is engaging in additional sexual liaisons. This too is often dismissed in adolescents, being viewed as common teenage jealousy. Therefore it is important when such symptoms is witness in adolescents that they be accessed properly by professionals, as delusions are known to cause severe harms in terms of mood instability or elevation.

Formal thought disorder

Perhaps the most significant symptom of psychosis is distortions in thinking. Researchers refer to the cognitive difficulties that are present in adolescent

experiencing psychosis as "formal thought disorder". Adolescent psychotic patients have been observed to present certain characteristics, such as rambling, illogical, overly vague or elaborate, repetitive speech or reasoning. Besides this, some researchers have also stated that psychotic juveniles tend to have unusual word choices and inappropriate breaks in their flow of speech. Although some researchers believe that disorganized speech and behaviour are effects of catatonia, although this itself is a symptom of psychosis.

Adolescents who suffer from these symptoms are sometimes thought to be exhibiting these symptoms due to still developing their cognitive functions. This is false, as after 7 years of age, children should not exhibit illogical thinking. Hence, evidence suggests that adolescents exhibiting cognitive difficulties are experiencing mental problems, most likely a form of psychosis.

TYPES OF PSYCHOTIC DISORDERS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

There are several different types of psychosis but when an individual experiences their first episode it is not always possible to determine which type they are suffering from. This is due to there still being no standard criteria that can be used to identify particular types of psychosis. To obtain a proper diagnosis, a comprehensive assessment is needed. Mental health professionals will require information from several sources to conduct a diagnosis, including the adolescent's own account, family history and physical examinations. However, diagnosis is still a difficult task for these professionals, as each adolescent's experience of psychosis may differ despite having similar diagnosis, meaning the symptoms they exhibit are different and they are affected by psychosis in different ways. Following are common types of psychotic disorders in adolescents:

Schizophrenia

Mental health professionals consider schizophrenia to be the archetypal psychotic disorder. Schizophrenia is both the most common and severe of psychotic conditions.

Some researchers estimate that almost 1 percent of the world population suffers from some form of schizophrenia. Adolescents experiencing schizophrenia exhibit all the core symptoms of psychosis, which are hallucinations, delusions and formal thought disorder.

Adolescents who have developed schizophrenia have been found to be "loners" as they have a history of being socially isolated or rejected. Similar to adults, young people with schizophrenia usually experience auditory hallucinations rather than visual hallucinations. However, some schizophrenia cases have recorded adolescents experiencing visual hallucinations, often being described as frightening. Besides hallucinations, delusions occur approximately in half of all juveniles with schizophrenia. These delusions have been found to increase in frequency and severity as a youth gets older. The hallucinations and delusions of adolescents with schizophrenia usually centre on their experiences, such as video games and school. Unlike adults, adolescents with schizophrenia do not exhibit poverty of speech content, but rather often fail to speak at the level of other youths of equal intelligence. Besides that, these youths have also been found to be very ambiguous when referring to people or objects.

Overall, males have been to experience schizophrenia at an earlier age compared to females. In the United States, nearly 40 percent of males who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia experienced their psychotic symptoms before the age of nineteenth. Hence, schizophrenia is not a rare disorder in adolescents. It is still not known why this cognitive condition occurs in the first place, although genetics appears to be a major contributor. Early detection of schizophrenia is important, as effective interventions at early stages have been found to contribute to better long-term recovery. Alongside treatments, family support is also important for these adolescents.

Major depressive disorder (MDD)

MDD on its own is not a psychotic disorder, however severely affected youths with MDD have been found to develop psychotic conditions. Although schizophrenia is the most common psychotic condition among adults, MDD have been found to occur more frequently in adolescents compared to schizophrenia. Some researchers estimate that as many as 4 percent of adolescents have MDD. According to current mental health professionals, the diagnostic criteria for MDD is that a person must have either a depressed mood or lose interest in almost all activities for at least fourteen days. Besides this, adolescents experiencing MDD should also exhibit at least four other symptoms for MDD, some of the more prevalent symptoms being: significant changes in appetite that is associated with either weight loss or weight gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation or retardation, fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of insignificance, reduced ability to focus or think and repetitive thoughts of suicide.

MDD is not related to ethnicity or socioeconomic status, however it has been found to be three times more common in adolescent females than in adolescent males. As of to date, the precise cause of MDD is unknown. Interestingly, it has been found that children who have one depressed parent have two to three times the likelihood of developing MDD, hence indicating that MDD is influenced by either genetics or environmental factors. There are also data to suggest that stressful life events and having a dysfunctional family can cause MDD in youths.

Adolescents have been found to also describe MDD differently than adults. Adults commonly described it as sadness or depression, but juveniles often describe it as feeling of emptiness and lack of motivation. Adolescents suffering psychotic MDD have often experience auditory hallucinations. But unlike schizophrenia, these auditory hallucinations are of a single voice, as opposed to multiple conversing voices. This "voice" is very demeaning towards the individual, often invoking a sense of guilt or shame in the adolescent.

Bipolar disorder

Similar to MDD, bipolar disorder are considered to be mood disorders. Bipolar disorders are less prevalent than MDD, affecting less than 1 percent of the population. Bipolar disorders are characterized by having both MDD symptoms and mania. Its common for adolescents to be initially diagnosed with MDD to develop symptoms of mania, therefore meeting the symptoms of bipolar disorders. Mania can be best described as specific and distinct period of time in which the individual has an elevated or irritable mood, these periods being at least one week long. During these mania episodes, adolescents often experience the common symptoms of psychosis.

Although the symptoms of bipolar disorder in juveniles are similar to that of adults, there have some distinct characteristics in adolescents. Adolescents showed symptoms of euphoria, grandiosity, hyperactivity and distractibility. A major effect of bipolar disorder in youths is that they commonly have dysfunctional and disruptive behaviours, making them unable to accept figures of authority. This often leads to school truancy or in more severe cases, criminal activities.

Schizoaffective disorders

Schizoaffective disorder is the combined symptoms of schizophrenia and bipolar disorders, either simultaneously or different distinct periods. It is categorized as a distinct psychotic disorder rather than a mood disorder. It is less common than other psychotic conditions, hence having very limited research on it. This is especially true for cases involving adolescents.

Individuals suffering from schizoaffective disorders experience typical psychotic symptoms for at least fourteen days, while also experiencing distinct mood disorders. However, it must be determined that the mood symptoms are not occurring as a result of the psychotic symptoms; otherwise it should be diagnosed as schizophrenia. This disorder has been found to be twice more prevalent in women than men. Initially, it was believed that schizoaffective only affect adults, however recently there

has been some cases involving adolescents. There are almost no research conducted on adolescent with schizoaffective, making it very difficult for the detection and treatment of these youngsters.

Brief psychotic disorder

Brief psychotic disorder, formerly known as brief reactive psychosis, is a disorder that has all the characteristics of schizophrenia. The only difference is that this disorder causes the individual to have rapid onset of psychosis which resolves after a short duration (a day to a month). The person is then able to function normally. This disorder is perhaps the least understood psychotic disorder; even its prevalence among the general population is unknown. Besides that, there is almost no data on adolescents experiencing this disorder. However, there are still reasons to believe that this psychotic disorder is present among youngsters. There is some theories that adolescents who experience stressful events will experience this brief psychotic disorder. More research is needed in this area.

CURRENT TREATMENTS FOR PSYCHOSIS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Treatments for psychosis are similar to most mental disorders, involving a combination of psychotherapy and medications. Sometimes self-help is encouraged for psychotic individuals. However, when it comes to adolescents, self-help is not advisable as these individuals normally do not possess the maturity to conduct such actions. Regardless, family support is vital for the rehabilitation process of adolescents suffering from psychosis. The least of treatments that are available for each respective type of psychotic condition is listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Treatments for psychotic condition in adolescents

Psychotic disorder	Treatment
Schizophrenia	Antipsychotic medications are vital for patients with schizophrenia. Unfortunately, these drugs have been found to cause extrapyramidal side effects, which can sometimes be fatal. As of to date, there is no antipsychotic treatment that is ideal for adolescents, therefore physicians need to observe these youngsters for aforementioned side effects when administering these drugs. Psychotherapy treatment should also involve the adolescent's family, as the family support system is vital for these patients.
Major depressive disorder	The most widely prescribed medications for adolescents with MDD is antidepressants, specifically serotonin selective reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). These drugs have been found to be safe for adolescents. Psychotherapy is vital for adolescent depression, especially Cognitive-behavioural therapy, as it has been very effective in treating adolescents with MDD.
Bipolar disorder	Lithium carbonate, carbamazepine and divalproex sodium are the most commonly prescribed medication. Besides that, psychosocial interventions are also used to help these young patients, alongside their respective families.
Schizoaffective disorder	Similar to schizophrenia treatments, antipsychotic medications alongside family-based psychotherapy are prescribed for adolescents with schizoaffective disorders.
Brief psychotic disorder	At present, there are no proven treatments for brief psychotic disorders in adolescents. Mental health professionals believe that if the symptoms cease within 48 hours, no treatments are necessary. However, if these symptoms continue beyond this period, antipsychotic medications are commonly prescribed.

RECOVERY FROM PSYCHOSIS ACCORDING TO ADOLESCENTS

Recovery in the context of psychotic conditions is not the complete removal of the mental illness but the removal of the psychotic symptoms, in other words, regaining cognitive functions. This means that these individuals will commonly still be taking medications and attending psychotherapies, but will be recovered from their psychotic conditions. When adults were interviewed for their views on their psychotic condition and their recovery from it, they were found to be generally negative about

it. They saw the disease as having irreversible effects and also felt guilty about "pressuring" their loved ones with their recovery process. Interestingly, when adolescents were interviewed about their recovery, they had usually a more optimistic view.

Lam *et al.*, (2010) found that 66.6 percent of adolescents felt their psychotic condition was life enhancing. They said that the mental illness helped them to become more mature and to appreciate life more. Most of them also said they now had more meaningful relationships with loved ones, as these individuals were commonly present throughout the recovery process. Some even said they felt stronger and had a sense of control over their lives. This is attributed to popular culture nowadays being more receptive towards psychotic conditions, often portraying these individuals in a positive light. For instance, in a famous Japanese anime (which is very popular among youngsters) titled *Aku No Hana*, the main character is portrayed to be experiencing severe psychosis. This is a positive direction of popular culture, as it makes adolescents more open to this condition and thus improving recovery.

Adolescents did voice out concern on the possible side effects of their medications. This concern is not unfounded, as there are still no drugs being developed specifically for treating psychosis in adolescents. Besides that, another concern was the prevalent societal stigma. Societal stigma regarding psychosis has been in existence for a long time. This stigma normally arises due to being misinformed; these people often see these recovering individuals as a threat to those around them. Adolescents recovering from psychosis have pointed out that typically the older generation were more likely to ostracize them due to their mental illness. Some even stated that they were unable to continue their previously held part-time jobs due to this stigma. Therefore, more awareness is needed among the general public regarding this condition to avoid further harming recovering adolescents.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Psychotic conditions among adolescents are both common and harmful. The key to reducing these harms is through early detection, as early treatments have been found to do wonders. Therefore, it is important for guardians of adolescents to be highly observant of any possible symptoms being exhibited by these youngsters. However, there is still a severe lacking in the development of prescription drugs specifically for adolescents with psychotic conditions. Having to opt for drugs designed for adults instead can sometimes lead to fatal side effects for these youngsters. Besides that, there is also a need for more awareness among the general public regarding psychotic conditions among adolescents. Lack of awareness has led to a prevalent societal stigma, which erodes the quality of life of these adolescents while making recovery even more difficult. Regardless, the most important aspect of recovery for adolescents with psychosis is support from family and friends.

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