

Early Detection in Schizophrenia

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Schizophrenia ranks among the top ten causes of disability in developed countries. There is a substantial amount of evidence to indicate that the longer the duration of untreated psychosis the worse the clinical outcome. Consequently, there is currently a clinical emphasis on attempting to reduce the duration of untreated psychosis by means of early psychosis detection and intervention. Clinicians need to be vigilant to the possibility of a first episode of psychosis in teenagers and young adults, the age group in which schizophrenia is most likely to appear for the first time.

Any young person suspected of experiencing psychological distress should be asked, among other things, about whether they have experienced delusions or hallucinations. Such questions as those listed below may be used to assist in detecting psychotic symptoms. These questions constitute a screening instrument for psychosis (*Bebbington P, Nayani T. The psychosis screening questionnaire. International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research 1995; 5: 11-19*), but it has not been tested in general practice for which some training would be necessary.

Psychosis Screening Questions:

Delusional mood

Have there ever been times when you felt that something strange and unexplainable was going on; things that other people would find it very hard to believe?

Grandiose delusions

Have you ever felt that you had special powers or talents that other people lack, and are not shared by any group of people?

Delusions of persecution

Have you ever felt that people were too interested in you, singling you out, or deliberately trying to harm you?

Delusions of reference

Have you ever felt that things were arranged, or happened, or said in a way so as to have a special meaning or message just for you?

Delusions of control; thought interference; passivity

Have you ever felt that your thoughts were being directly interfered with or controlled by another person in a way that people would find hard to believe, for instance, through telepathy?

Hallucinations

Have there ever been times when you heard voices or noises when there was no one around and no ordinary explanation seemed possible? Or have you ever seen visions or things that other people could not see?

The list is only a guide to the types of probe questions that can be used to detect psychosis. A positive response to any one of these questions is enough to suggest that further clinical enquiry should be conducted to establish the duration of the symptom(s), the degree of conviction as to their reality, the extent of emotional distress associated with them and whether the patient feels compelled to act upon them.

Further information from the Schizophrenia Library www.schizophreniaresearch.org.au

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