

SPECIALISTFOCUS



Early Psychosis Intervention Programme



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At-Risk Mental State (Psychotic “Prodrome”)

Psychotic “prodrome” is a term used in clinical medicine to refer to the early symptoms and signs that a person experiences before the full-blown syndrome of psychosis becomes evident. It is a retrospective concept and its presence can only be confirmed by the subsequent development of a psychotic disorder.

Therefore, one cannot diagnose a psychotic “prodrome” with any certainty based on the presence of symptoms such as low mood, anxiety and social isolation as these symptoms may indicate the presence of other psychiatric disorders, and not just psychosis. Instead, the person displaying such symptoms should be thought of as having an at-risk mental state (ARMS).

This terminology highlights that the person has some factors that put him/her at risk of developing a psychotic disorder. Hence, not every individual with an at-risk mental state will go on to develop a psychotic disorder; studies have estimates that 20% to 50% of individuals with an at-risk mental state will eventually go on to develop a psychotic disorder, while the remaining individuals may experience a resolution of symptoms or go on to develop other psychiatric disorders (eg Bipolar Disorder).

Advantages Of Intervention In The Psychotic “Prodrome” Phase

There are numerous advantages to providing treatment to individuals with an at-risk mental state:

- Minimising the disability of a possible mental illness (eg psychosis)
- Some recovery occurring before the symptoms and poor functioning become entrenched
- Possibility of preventing, delaying or ameliorating the onset of psychosis, hence reducing the incidence of the disorder as well as minimising the need for hospitalisation and other lifestyle disruptions
- Rapid detection and timely commencement of treatment if psychosis develops, hence minimising the duration of untreated psychosis as several studies have found that individuals with a prolonged duration of untreated psychosis have significantly poorer global functioning and more severe psychotic symptoms
- An avenue of help is provided to these individuals as studies have shown that individuals with an at-risk mental state are often distressed due to the many symptoms, difficulties in social and occupational functioning, and cognitive deficits that they experience

Signs And Symptoms Of At-Risk Mental State

An individual with an at-risk mental state may start to experience psychotic “prodrome” symptoms during the adolescence years. Some of the common signs and symptoms include:

- Deterioration in academic performance
- Reduced concentration and attention
- Reduced drive and motivation
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Odd thinking and behaviour
- Suspiciousness and mistrust of others
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Sleep disturbances

Individuals with an at-risk mental state may also experience psychotic symptoms but of lesser intensity, frequency and duration. An example is an individual who complains of auditory hallucinations but reveals that he/she cannot make out what the voices are saying (less intensity), the voices are transient in nature (less duration) and hears them only sporadically (less frequency).

Support For Wellness Achievement Programme (SWAP)

The Early Psychosis Intervention Programme (EPIP) recently established the **Support for Wellness Achievement Programme (SWAP)** for individuals above the age of 16 with an at-risk mental state. SWAP distinguishes itself from the mainstream mental health clinics in the following ways; the name for the clinic is non-labelling with no direct reference to mental health or psychiatric services, it is located within a non-traditional mental health setting so as to improve accessibility and encourage more individuals in distress to seek the necessary assessment and treatment, and psychosocial interventions will form the foundation of the treatment, as individuals with at-risk mental state have not developed the full-blown syndrome of psychosis.

Referral Procedure

If you suspect that an individual is developing a psychotic disorder or is at risk of developing, you are welcome to discuss the case by telephone with the EPIP triage service at **9017 8212**. SWAP is presently located at the Community Wellness Centre.