

Tip Sheet for Helping People in NAVIGATE

Psychosis often causes people to experience high levels of distress—such as anxiety, suspiciousness, confused thinking, or unusual thoughts or perceptions. Medications usually help with this, but they sometimes take a few weeks or months to achieve their full benefits. In the meantime, many relatives have found the following guidelines useful when interacting with a family member in acute distress.

Keep expectations minimal, but don't let them all go

In addition to having unusual thoughts and perceptions, persons with psychosis may be dealing with unpleasant medication side-effects and confused thinking. They may be so uncomfortable that they stop doing routine activities, such as taking showers, coming to meals, or taking medication. While relatives should be understanding about how difficult it may be to continue to do day-to-day activities, taking care of oneself often lifts our mood and helps us feel more a part of the world. Relatives should continue to have small but manageable expectations for their family members to maintain their routines, such as washing each day, attending family meals, getting out of the house for some fresh air most days, etc.

Encourage but do not nag. Choose your battles

People with psychosis are uniquely sensitive to criticism, and this can lead to an increase in symptoms or social withdrawal. When individuals first begin treatment, they may have a hard time functioning. Praise your relative for taking *any* small steps to getting better, and limit your criticism. Focus on the priority issues—taking medication, making appointments, getting up for a part of each day. There will be time to deal with bigger issues later.

Help your relative keep to as close to a normal routine as possible

It is very easy for persons experiencing psychosis to get off their schedules—such as sleeping most of the day and staying up much of the night. This kind of schedule develops for some people because medication side effects make them feel sleepy during the day or because they feel a little “safer” being awake at night when fewer people are around and social demands are less. Unfortunately, sleeping all day may lead to missing appointments and interfere with recovery efforts. While it is important to recognize that persons recovering from psychosis usually need more rest, helping them keep a regular schedule as much as possible can help them get back on track sooner.

Don't argue with a relative over worrisome thoughts

If the relative in NAVIGATE expresses an unusual thought or experience as a “fact,” don't argue the truth of it. If the relative with psychosis reports an odd belief such as “The TV is watching me” or “We are not safe here,” arguing with him/her may only prompt him/her to state his/her point more firmly. Few of us like to be contradicted. If the relative offers an odd belief such as “The TV is watching me” or “We are not safe here,” you don't have to agree with him or her, but you don't have to argue either. When people with a psychosis state these types of beliefs, they usually believe them firmly, and hold onto them tenaciously. Instead of arguing, family members can empathize with the underlying feeling the relative might be having—such as fear, confusion, frustration, or uncertainty.

Here is an example:

- Person with psychosis—*“We need to leave the restaurant. Everyone is looking at me.”*
- Family Member—*“It sounds like you feel very uncomfortable. I know this is hard. Let me just finish my sandwich and we can go.”* Note that the family member *did not* say “No, that is not true. No one is looking at you.” This statement might only make the person with psychosis argue more strongly that people *are* looking at him.

Continue to do any enjoyable activities together

If you and your relative with psychosis used to like watching sports together, see if you can watch a little of a ball game together. If the two of you used to like going for a ride to get a cup of coffee, try to go even if you only spend a short time at the coffee shop. Continue to look for positive, low stress activities to help you feel connected.