Some other helpful resources

Information leaflets available in this series:
- Psychological therapy and social interventions for psychosis
- Hearing voices
- Disturbing beliefs and thoughts
- Psychosis and recovery
- Knowing someone with psychosis – carers’ leaflet

Samaritans (www.samaritans.org.uk)
   Offers a 24-hour telephone service.
   Tel: 08457 909090

Scottish Recovery Network
   (www.scottishrecovery.net)

NHS Direct
   Offers a telephone help-line.
   Tel: 08454 242424

MIND (www.mind.org.uk)
   Offers a telephone advice help-line.
   Tel: 0845 7660163

Breathing Space
   Offers a free confidential help-line for individuals experiencing low mood or worries and wanting to talk to someone (especially males under 40).
   Tel: 0800 838587

What is Psychosis?

Psychological Views on Psychosis:

a leaflet for anyone with psychosis or who knows of somebody with psychosis

Leaflet produced by:
Julie Hardie & Helen Griffiths
Clinical Psychology

One of a series of leaflets about psychosis written by psychologists for service-users, carers and professionals within NHS Lothian

September 2008
The term psychosis is used to describe a range of experiences including hearing voices, unusual thoughts or beliefs, rapid changes in mood and changes in behaviour. These experiences are surprisingly common. In fact, 10% of the population claim to hear voices that others cannot hear and around 33% of the population sometimes have suspicious or paranoid thoughts. For many people, these experiences have no impact on their day-to-day life, but sometimes they can become very distressing. This depends on how people make sense of them.

If you do have these experiences and find them distressing, it can be helpful to understand what psychosis is and what you can do to help these problems. But firstly, it is important to know that you are not alone. Five in 100 young people will experience an episode of psychosis. This means that it is more common than diabetes in young people. Secondly, it does not have to be a life-long problem; a lot of people recover.

**What is psychosis?**

**Medication**
You may be referred to see a psychiatrist, who is likely to prescribe medication. Medication is usually the first form of treatment a person will receive. Anti-psychotic medication can help reduce the symptoms of psychosis and the associated anxiety. Talk to your GP or psychiatrist if you have any worries about taking medication.

**Psychological therapy**
Everyone with psychosis has the right to request a psychological assessment, as psychological therapy can be an important part of treatment. It can help you understand why the experiences may have developed in the first place, why they persist and also help you to develop ways to cope in the future.

**Social interaction**
Talking to other people can reduce feelings of loneliness and increase self-esteem. Joining a group for people who have had similar experiences may help to reduce feelings of isolation and you can learn from others’ experiences. Having meaningful activities to do during the day, such as returning to work or study, can be very important parts of recovering.
Psychosis can happen to anybody, but it is most common in older teenagers and young adults. There are likely to be a number of different reasons for this. Significant factors may include the stress of exams, leaving home, not sleeping well, using recreational drugs and others belittling you.

At first, people often feel anxious or depressed, and begin to show changes in their behaviour e.g. their sleeping patterns change. People often try to make sense of the unusual experiences happening to them and this process may lead to the development of unusual beliefs. During this period people may feel confused and begin to more frequently experience the unusual psychotic experiences described earlier, e.g. hearing voices.

At this stage, the problems may resolve, but for others the problems develop and become more distressing and disabling. It is important to get help early, as treatment has been shown to improve recovery rates.

What help can I get to recover?

Psychosis can be a distressing experience, so it is best to get help as early as possible. Talk to someone you trust, such as your family or friends. Minimise your intake of drugs and alcohol. Try and think about how you could cope better with the stress in your life. Make sure you are taking care of yourself by eating and sleeping properly.

Your GP will be able to arrange further treatment for you, as there are various treatments available, including psychological, medical and social approaches.
No specific cause for psychosis has ever been discovered. However, there is evidence to suggest that social, psychological, environmental and biological factors may all be important for the development of psychosis. However, they seem to be important to different degrees for different individuals. It seems that anyone can have a psychotic experience under certain circumstances.

**Social factors**
Psychotic experiences often seem to follow significant events in someone’s life. Many people who have experienced psychosis have also experienced trauma, neglect, abuse and/or persecution at some point in their life.

**Psychological factors**
Some people have had experiences in life that can lower their self-esteem or make them feel anxious and suspicious about other people. This suspicious style of thinking may contribute to paranoid fears and the worries associated with psychosis. Psychotic beliefs may result from people trying to find meaning in things that happen to them, or making links between things, often by ‘jumping to conclusions’ because the person is scared.

**Biological factors**
If a close relative has psychosis (such as a parent or sibling) there appears to be a higher risk of developing psychosis. Physical factors, such as a head injury, may also increase the risk of developing psychosis. We also know that the long-term use of cannabis or other drugs such as cocaine is likely to increase the risk of psychosis.

**Why does psychosis develop?**

Research suggests that under enough stress anybody can have psychotic experiences. Common kinds of stress linked to psychosis include:

- Anxiety
- Persecutory Experiences
- Lack of sleep (e.g. jet lag)
- Physical illness (e.g. a virus)
- Sensory Deprivation
- Alcohol/Drug use
- Social Isolation

For some people, smaller amounts of stress can trigger psychosis than for others i.e. some people seem to be more ‘prone’ or ‘vulnerable’ to hearing voices or having unusual beliefs. This vulnerability may be psychological, social or biological. For example, vulnerability may be inherited from our parents, developed following traumatic life experiences or learnt whilst growing up. The graph below shows how stress and vulnerability may influence the development of psychosis for an individual. In other words, even somebody with very little vulnerability to developing psychosis may do so under enough stress, whilst someone who is more vulnerable may develop psychosis with very little stress.