



**NHS**  
Greater Glasgow  
and Clyde

A blue-tinted background image showing a crowd of people. In the foreground, there are two prominent white silhouettes of people. One is on the left, hunched over with their head buried in their hands, suggesting distress or despair. The other is on the right, also hunched over, looking down. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

# PSYCHOSIS

by Simon Stuart



[www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)

**This booklet is for people who would like to know more about psychosis.**

The STEPS Team would like to thank Dr Alison Blair for her help and advice with this booklet.

Design: Chris Gray



**2** Psychosis

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# 1. What is psychosis?

Psychosis is a word used to mean losing touch with real life. This could be hearing or seeing things other people don't see or hear. Or it could be having strange beliefs that other people don't share.

For instance, you might feel your thoughts are being read by other people – or that other people are putting thoughts in your head. You might not be able to prove it, but you're sure it's true.

Or you might believe the TV or radio is telling you what to do. Beliefs like these are common in psychosis. The next section will look at some of them in more detail.

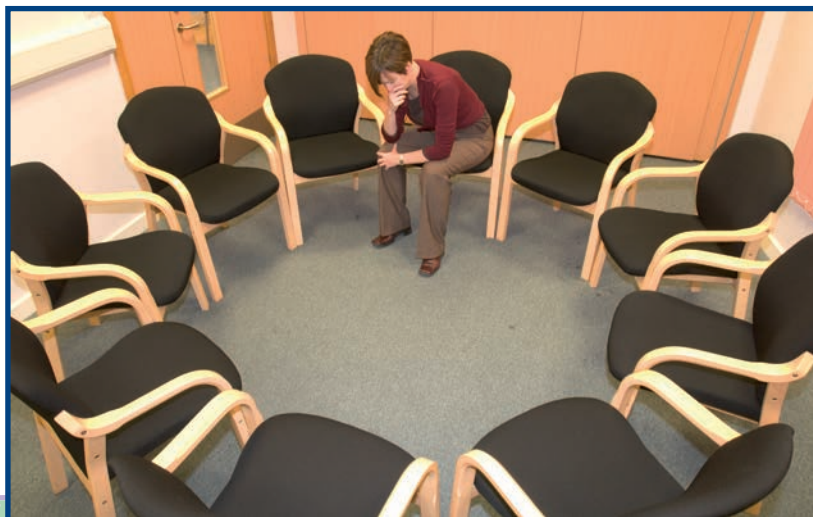
**Psychosis is more common than you might think.** It is thought that one in every 20 people has a psychotic episode at some point in their life. Some people will just have one, while others may have more. It can be linked to mental-health conditions such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, though this is not always the case.

These days, many doctors don't see psychosis as a condition on its own. Rather, they look at someone with psychosis as being overwhelmed by upsetting thoughts and feelings. You could also think of it as moving along a scale away from normal thinking. **Stress can play a big part in this, as we'll see below.**



Psychosis can be very scary and upsetting, both for people who have it and for their friends and loved ones. But there is lots of help available – and most people recover and go on to live a normal life.

This leaflet will tell you more about some of the symptoms and causes of psychosis. It will also give you helpful advice about what you can do if you think you have it – or if you know someone else who might.



## 2. What are the signs and symptoms?

There are several signs associated with psychosis. Let's look at some of these in more detail.

### Hallucinations

This means **seeing, feeling, smelling** or **hearing** things that aren't there.

- **Seeing:** You might see strange colours or shapes, or perhaps imaginary people or animals.
- **Feeling and smelling:** You might have the sensation of insects or spiders crawling on your skin, even though you can't see anything there. Or you might be aware of a strange smell that nobody else seems to notice.
- **Hearing:** Hearing things other people don't is more common than you might think. One estimate says that more than one in ten people will hear a voice that other people don't hear at some point in their life.

Hearing voices happens a lot in psychosis. Some people might hear voices and not find them a problem. For most they can be very distressing. They might be mocking or insulting, and you might feel you have to fight them away. They might tell you to do things, like cut yourself or do other harmful things.

### Delusions

This means having ideas or firm beliefs that other people think are strange.



All of us get odd thoughts in our minds at some time. Usually we don't pay them any attention and they go away just as quickly as they came. But a delusion is different. It's a much more fixed belief.

These are some examples of delusions.

- **Feeling that people are out to get you:** For instance, you might think people you don't know are saying bad things about you. Or you might think people are watching you or recording what you say.
- **Feeling you're part of something scary:** You might feel that the government is out to get you, or that secret agents are looking for you. This can mean you start to behave differently. For instance, you might avoid white vans because you don't know who's in them.
- **Feeling the TV or radio are speaking to you:** You might be convinced that there are special messages for you on TV or the radio, which nobody else can understand. Or you might feel there are coded messages in the newspapers that are only for you.
- **Feeling that other people are doing things with your thoughts:** This could be feeling that people are listening to your thoughts, or that they've put something inside your head so they can do that. Or it could be that someone else is controlling your thoughts in some way.



# What are the signs and symptoms?

- **Feeling that other people aren't who they say:** You might think people you're close to – like your parents or your partner – aren't themselves any more. You might think someone else is pretending to be them and that you can't talk to them any more.
- **Feeling that you're someone special:** You might think you have special powers of some kind – that you can make things happen, either good or bad. Or you might think you are a great leader with a message you need to tell everyone.

All of this can be scary and confusing. It can be exhausting dealing with it – and it can make you angry if you don't think other people are taking you seriously.

It is important to remember that delusions like this can't simply be explained by religion or culture. But it is important to take other people's background into account when they are talking about how they feel.

For instance, someone might say they believe a curse has been put on them. But if they come from a country or culture that accepts witchcraft as a fact of life, this should not be thought of as strange.



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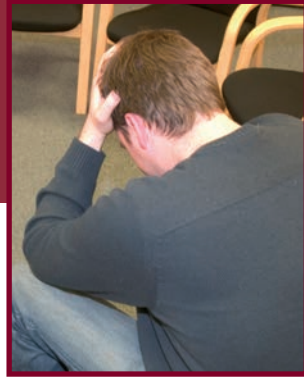
## Other signs linked to psychosis

There are other symptoms of psychosis too. These are ones that are often noticed more by friends and loved ones.

- **Confused thoughts and speech:** Psychosis can affect the way people think. This can come out in the way they talk. They might speak quickly and in a way that doesn't seem to make much sense. They might switch topics in the middle of a sentence, or come out with things that don't have anything to do with what was being talked about. Or they might talk slowly, with long pauses. This is known as "thought blocking". They might say they are finding it difficult to turn their thoughts into words.
- **Lack of insight:** Often people with psychosis will not think they are acting strangely at all. If they are hearing or seeing things, they might not accept that these things aren't really there. But this isn't always the case. Sometimes people realise exactly what's going on, which can be terrifying for them.
- **Changes in mood:** Some people with psychosis may be low in mood and energy. They can stop doing things they used to do and find that everyday things such as just getting out of bed and getting dressed become a struggle. Others can be very active and have lots of energy and things they want to do. Some people can shift between different feelings many times a day.



# Personal stories



## 1. Alec's story

*I'd not been sleeping well and I suppose I was getting more and more into my own wee world. My boss was always getting on at me for daydreaming. And it wasn't great at home either. My dad was quite scary and I knew I was boozing too much and smoking too much hash to try to shut it all out.*

*One day I had to go through to Edinburgh for work. When I got to the station I couldn't find my ticket. This guy had brushed against me and I figured he'd taken it out of my pocket. So instead of buying a new ticket I decided I was just going to jump the barrier.*

*Once I'd got on the train, I ran into the toilet and I messed my hair up with the water. And I put my shirt over my jumper to try and make myself look different. I spent the whole journey trying to hide from the ticket guy. It was dead exciting. It reminded me of when I was a wee boy and I used to read spy stories. And then I just had all these ideas coming into my head. I thought maybe I was a spy. I mean, I wasn't daydreaming. This all felt real. I was scared but I was excited too. Perhaps the pickpocketing had been some kind of test. Maybe my crappy job was cover for my real job as a spy!*

*From then on I just found myself going more and more into this other world. I started to lose it big-time. And over the next couple of weeks it stopped being exciting and got really scary. I couldn't work out what was real life and what wasn't. And*



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*then I had these voices in my head and they were going on, talking about me and trying to make me do stuff I didn't want to do. I was sure one of them was Satan. That really freaked me out.*

*I thought my mum and my girlfriend were in on it too. It felt like everyone was ganging up. My girlfriend couldn't handle it and she dumped me. I can't blame her but that made it worse. I didn't want to leave my room because of the voices. I was so scared.*

*Eventually my mum got me to the doctor. It wasn't easy to persuade me, but she didn't give up. She just kept telling me she'd look after me. I didn't know what to believe any more but there were still times when I trusted her.*

*Going to the doctor changed everything. She got the mental health team involved and they gave me tablets and that really helped. They thought I might have to stay in the hospital for a bit but my mum said we'd see how I got on at home first. And slowly everything started to calm down. And the mental health team gave me some really good advice about how to look after myself: to watch what I drank and to lay off the hash.*

*Now I'm getting better I can see I was in a bad way back then. But I know the signs now. I know that if I start feeling like that again I need to tell someone. Because I don't ever want to go through that again. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.*



# 3. What causes it?

There are many different ideas about why psychosis happens. Unfortunately, the simple fact is that some people seem more likely than others to have a psychotic episode.

This could be because it runs in your family – even if you’re not aware of it. Or it might be because of things that happened to you earlier in your life.

- Some physical health problems can cause symptoms similar to psychosis. For example, some **infections** can have this effect.
- Some people with psychosis may have **schizophrenia** or **bipolar disorder**. This is by no means always the case. However, it is important to discuss your diagnosis with your doctor or another health professional.
- Drugs can spark a psychotic episode: not just illegal ones like **cannabis, cocaine, LSD, ecstasy** (and many more) but also **alcohol**.
- Also, **prescribed drugs** from the doctor don’t agree with everyone. In some people they can trigger symptoms of psychosis.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that by taking any of these you’re going to have a psychotic episode. But it is important to remember that some people are more prone to psychosis than others. What might be fine for your friends could be very bad for you.



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- **Stress** is a very important factor in psychosis. High amounts of stress in anyone can lead to a psychotic episode. But the tipping point is different for all of us. What one person finds bearable could be too much for someone else.

Lots of people think of stress as something that happens to them at work. But it can come in lots of other forms. **Relationship problems, money worries, the death of a loved one, physical illness** (yours or someone else's), **being a victim of crime** ... all of these, and many more, are causes of stress. Even happy events can put people under stress: **getting married**, for instance, or **going on holiday**.

Again: this doesn't mean that everyone who is stressed will have a psychotic episode. But there is lots of evidence to suggest that stress is a trigger.

In **Part 4** we'll look at what you can do if you're worried about the way you feel.



# Personal stories



## 2. Carol's story

*It was one night a couple of years ago that Davie rang me up and just sounded different. He'd moved to Glasgow for his job and he hadn't been in touch as much as he used to but I wasn't that worried. He worked really hard and when he wasn't doing that he'd go out and enjoy himself: let off some steam with his pals.*

*But when my boy rang that night I could tell something was wrong. He just sounded really flat, really empty. And then he started telling me about his work and people being out to get him. I told him that sounded unlikely, but I just thought he was a bit stressed.*

*I didn't hear from him again for a week so I gave him a call. But I couldn't get through. Then he rang me back at three in the morning. He said he was at work: that if he went in during the day then people were going to take his ideas. Now I got really worried. And then he said he had to go because someone was talking to him. I tried calling back but he turned off his phone.*

*The next day I went straight up to Glasgow to see him. I was so worried. I thought that if he'd been at work at night he'd be at his flat so I went straight round. He didn't answer but I tried the door anyway and it was open. When I went in it was a mess. All the curtains were shut and the floors were covered with paper. The radio was on, playing away to no-one. While I was standing there, he came in. He'd not shaved in days and he looked awful. His eyes didn't look like him, you know? The really weird thing was, he didn't even seem that bothered to see me. He just started telling me about these people that were trying to get him and how they couldn't be allowed to because of what he knew. He was really hard to follow and none of it was making any sense.*

*I went to turn off the radio but he shouted and said he needed it on because there'd be a message for him soon. I didn't understand what he meant. So I went to open the curtains and he just lost it. He kept*



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*shouting about how people mustn't see him. Then he started going through all the piles of papers on the floor and going on and on about these plans he had; how he had to get to London to tell the Queen what he knew.*

*I didn't have any numbers for his friends so I rang my doctor back home. I didn't know what else to do. He said I should take him to the hospital. But he didn't want to go. I must have sat there for two hours trying to get Davie to listen to me. Eventually he let me sit down next to him and hold his hand, and that was when he said he'd come with me. I told him I loved him and that it would make things better if he did.*

*We went to the hospital and saw a doctor who said Davie had had a psychotic episode. That terrified me. It sounded like my son was a psychopath. But the doctor explained that it didn't mean that at all. He had a long talk with Davie and persuaded him – I don't know how, but he did – to come home with me for a wee while. And he gave him medicine and told me to make sure he took it.*

*It wasn't easy. For the first few days he wouldn't sleep at all. And he kept telling me he had to go back to Glasgow because that was where his plans were. But after a week or so he was more like himself. He could even remember some of what had happened. He told me he'd had a really bad falling-out with two of his pals, which I hadn't realised, and said he'd been in all hours at work. He's sure that had something to do with what happened.*

*He lost a lot of his confidence and he didn't want to go back to work. But his doctor wrote to his boss and they said he could come back part-time for a bit. That really helped. Now he's doing a different job which he's happier with and I think that's made a big difference.*

*Since then I've kept a close eye on him, especially if he sounds like he's getting stressed. But he's been fine. I think we were lucky that we caught things when we did.*



## 4. What can I do if I think I have it?

If you are worried about the thoughts or feelings you are having, one of the best things to do is speak to your GP. They will be able to listen and help, and put you in touch with other people who can do more, such as mental-health workers.

If you have been told you have a mental-health condition, you may have been given a mental-health worker. You should let them know if there is a change in the way you feel. That change might be hearing things you don't want to. Or it might be thinking things you don't want to think.

Lots of people worry they'll be sent to hospital if they tell their doctor how they're feeling. But there's lots of support that can be offered without you needing to go to hospital. Even if you do have to go to hospital, it may not be for long.

As you might have realised from reading the other sections, psychosis is different for different people. That's also true of treatment and recovery. One in five people who have a psychotic episode – even if it lasts for a year or more – will never have another one. Others might have lots of episodes throughout their lives. But that doesn't mean they have to be a big problem.

Lots of people find they can get on with their life and their jobs without their voices or feelings getting in the way. They cope with their psychotic symptoms without them being a big problem day-to-day.



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## The main treatments

- **Medication** is usually offered to people with psychosis. The main drugs are called anti-psychotics. Like all drugs, it's important to remember they don't always work for everyone – but they are often very effective.

Your doctor will tell you more about what medication is best for you. Again, like all drugs, there can be side-effects. If you find you're getting bad side-effects, tell your doctor. There might be something different you can take.

- **Talking treatments** are also helpful. A therapist or mental-health worker can listen to what you're going through and give help and support. Talking can suit some people more than others – but lots of people find it helps to be able to tell someone how they are feeling.
- Most people with psychosis will be given a **key worker**. This will be through their Community Mental Health Team, or **CMHT** for short. They can help you with lots of different things. This doesn't just mean managing the psychosis but dealing with other aspects of your life like benefits, money and housing. Your key worker can meet you where you prefer: at their **work**, at your **home** or somewhere local like a **community centre**.

As well as giving you emotional support, key workers can help you come up with a **staying well plan**. This can help you keep on top of your stress levels and stop problems coming back. If you can learn to spot the early signs of psychosis, you can do things that stop it getting worse.



# What can I do if I think I have it?

This might involve a structured talking therapy such as CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy). CBT can be offered to you if it is felt it would be useful. It can help you manage your stress levels and spot any warning signs that mean you might be becoming unwell.

## Other things that can be done

It depends on where you live, but other help might be available. Here are some examples of what could be offered.

- **Family therapy** is a talking treatment where a whole family is given advice. This explains what helps someone with psychosis, such as keeping stress levels down. Even more importantly, it explains what doesn't help, such as fighting and arguing. Having a loved one with psychosis can be stressful in itself, and this kind of therapy gives everyone a chance to talk.
- You may be offered **outpatient appointments** at hospital. These allow doctors to keep track of how you're getting on, and make sure any treatments are working as well as they can.
- Sometimes people with psychosis will need to stay in hospital for a while. If a psychotic episode is particularly bad, the choice to do this will be made by doctors – though every effort will be made to obtain your consent for treatment.



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- There are lots of different **self-help groups** for people with psychosis. These will be different depending on where you live. See the **Useful Contacts** at the end of this booklet for some more information. Key workers, doctors and other health professionals will be able to tell you more about what's available in your area.

## **What about my job? And my family?**

Having psychosis doesn't mean you can't work. As we saw above, there are many people who hear voices but don't find it gets in the way of their job. It's up to you how much you tell your boss, but most people find the best thing to do is be honest and stay on good terms with your employer. If you are off work for a while, you have certain rights that your employer has to respect.

As for your family: the important thing is that you can recognise when you're becoming unwell and do something about it if you can. Lots of people with mental-health conditions have children – and most care for them just as well as anyone else does. Your GP or mental-health worker can offer you more help and advice.

Sometimes people who are close to you can spot problems before you're aware of them. If you feel able to, it can be good to talk about how you're feeling with family – or friends – that you're close to. They might even be able to come along to some of your meetings with your key worker.



## 5. What can I do if I'm worried about someone else?

When someone you care about has psychosis, it can be stressful, upsetting and scary. It can be hard to talk to them: you might not understand why they are doing or saying certain things. They might think everything's fine and not understand why you're worried.

If you can accept how they are feeling, that's a big help. Remember they are the same person, even if they are acting strangely. What they are feeling is likely to be very real for them. So arguing with them is no use! Instead, try to listen and support them. This can help them see that you are there to help. It can also help you understand what they are going through.

If you can listen, support and reassure, you can encourage them to get further help, for example by speaking to their doctor or mental-health worker. But there's nothing to stop you talking to your own GP about them, too – especially if you're worried that they might be at risk.

It can be very stressful looking after someone with psychosis. If you're feeling this, speak to your GP about how you're feeling. There are also groups that support carers: see the **Useful Contacts** in the next section for more on these.



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# Personal stories



## 3. Sarah's story

*It's been 10 years now since it first went wrong for me and I know things are never going to be the same.*

*I had a bad childhood. I don't want to talk about it but it messed me up badly. I left school earlier than I probably should and I ended up getting a job I really hated, working night shifts in a call centre. And that's when I started hearing the voice telling me I was useless and that I was just a failure.*

*It would come and go but I hated hearing it. I'd put my hands over my ears and try to block it out but that didn't help. One night I did that at work – I put my hands over my ears and said "SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" – and someone saw me. They laughed and took the piss, and that made me feel even worse. And it made the voices worse, too. There was more than one of them now and they weren't just telling me I was a failure: they started telling me what I should be thinking, what I should be doing. Some of it was really bad stuff. I didn't want to do any of it but I didn't know how long I could get away without doing what they said.*

*I started seeing things, too. I saw shadows moving everywhere, all the time. I couldn't stand being in my flat on my own because of the shadows and the voices. But I didn't have anywhere to go.*

*One night I went out and the police stopped me on Argyle Street, walking along at 2am with my pyjama bottoms on and no shoes. They thought I was drunk or wasted. I wouldn't tell them where I lived so they ended up taking me back to the police station while they worked out what to do. That was when the voices went into overdrive and I couldn't stand it any longer. I just started screaming at them to stop. The cops panicked and called the ambulance and I got taken to hospital.*



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*I didn't have anyone to call who could help so they just kept me in the hospital. They loaded me up on drugs: I don't know what they were giving me but it made me shake and I felt like I couldn't swallow. There were some people on the ward who were lovely and tried to look after me. But there were some who really scared me. There was one guy who would go into these total rages and call me all sorts of names. I told the nurse but I don't think they took me seriously.*

*After a few days they said I could go. I think I felt better but I can't really remember. The doctors and nurses would tell me things but I didn't want to listen. They gave me drugs to take but I didn't like the shaky way they made me so I flushed them down the toilet when I got home. I didn't have a job to go back to so I just sat there in the flat. Then I started hearing the voice again. I was so scared I went back to the police because they'd helped me. They called the hospital again and I went back.*

*I spent three months in the hospital. They just loaded me up on drugs and didn't talk to me. But then I got a new doctor and he was brilliant. He listened to me and asked me questions. Eventually I started to tell him some of the things that had happened in the past. That helped: just to have someone to listen. Someone who took me seriously for once.*

*Over the past 10 years I've been in hospital four times now. When I start to feel better I stop taking my drugs because it's not fair to make me take them when I'm feeling well. But the doctors say that's no good and that I need to keep taking them. I don't want to be on them all my life, though. I just want a job, and someone to listen. One of the doctors said the mental health team could help. But I don't want them to give me more drugs. I just want them to take me seriously.*



## 6. Useful contacts

These are just some of the groups, people and websites that can help. Doctors in your area and key workers will be able to tell you more.

### **Glasgow Association for Mental Health (GAMH)**

Provides support to people with mental-health difficulties and also to carers.

**Telephone: 0141 552 5592**

**Website: [www.gamh.org.uk](http://www.gamh.org.uk)**

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### **Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)**

Provides a variety of help and support around Scotland. Its website has information and downloads that may help.

**Telephone: 0800 917 3466**

**Website: [www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)**

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### **Support In Mind Scotland**

A group that works to improve the day-to-day life of people with mental illness, as well as their carers, family and friends.

**Telephone: 0131 662 4359**

**Website: [www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk](http://www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk)**

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## **Mind**

A group that helps people take control of their mental health. It offers a variety of information and advice.

**Telephone: 0300 123 3393**

**Website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)**

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## **Psychosis Sucks!**

This is an American website with a lot of very useful information about psychosis, both for people who have it and for their friends and family.

**Website: [www.psychosissucks.ca](http://www.psychosissucks.ca)**

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## **Am I Normal?**

A website set up by teams working with people with psychosis in England. It has a lot of advice and help and can be useful for friends and family too.

**Website: [www.aminormal.org](http://www.aminormal.org)**

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## **Rethink**

Rethink helps people with mental-health difficulties, focusing on recovery and quality of life. It is also known as the Schizophrenia Fellowship.

**Telephone: 0845 456 4555**

**Email: [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)**

**Website: [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)**

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# Useful contacts

## Hearing Voices Network

A group that helps people who hear voices. It can put people in touch with self-help groups in their area, as well as offering advice and information.

**Telephone: 0114 271 8210**

**Website: [www.hearing-voices.org](http://www.hearing-voices.org)**

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## EPPIC

Although it is based in Australia, this group has a website with information that many people – particularly friends and family – have found very useful.

**Website: [www.eppic.org.au/psychosis](http://www.eppic.org.au/psychosis)**

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## Iris

An organisation that promotes the idea of helping people with psychosis as soon as possible. It has a small number of resources online.

**Website: [www.iris-initiative.org.uk/resource/](http://www.iris-initiative.org.uk/resource/)**

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## MDF The Bipolar Organisation

An organisation that works to help people who have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Its website has a lot of information about the condition.

**Website: [www.mdf.org.uk](http://www.mdf.org.uk)**

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**This booklet is part of a series on common problems also available for download on [www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)**

**Controlling your stress  
(anxiety and depression)**

**Wellbeing  
(for teenagers)**

**Panic Attacks**

**Health Anxiety**

**Phobias (General)**

**Agoraphobia**

**Coping with a death**

**Fatigue**

**Anger**

**Alcohol and sensible  
drinking**

**Antidepressants**

**Insomnia**

**Relaxation**

**Self-esteem**

**Coping with trauma**

**Social anxiety**

**Obsessive-Compulsive  
Disorder**

**Height Phobia**

**Coming Off**

**Antidepressants**

**Five A Day To Keep You  
Feeling Well**

**Cannabis**

**All these booklets can be downloaded, free of charge, from [www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com). Some are also available in printed form.**