

Fresh and different perspectives on understanding what clinicians call “psychosis”, by people who’ve been there sharing some of what they’ve learned.

## Am I going crazy???

You might feel like you’re going crazy, experiencing things you have not experienced before, and no one around you understands.

You feel scared, everyone around you feels scared, they may be telling you “you need treatment”.

Your body might feel overwhelmed, you mind spinning, confused.

You’re likely not sleeping much, or sleeping but not too well and also finding it difficult to eat well enough to nourish your body.

## Dazed and Confused

You might be finding it hard to think, to find words, or just be wondering: what the heck!?

You might feeling like you’ve been hit by a truck, or a train.

You might feel nothing and everything all at once.

You are likely finding yourself surrounded by people telling you what’s wrong, what to call it, and what to call yourself - and all, mostly, in pretty confusing technical-sounding words that are at best bewildering and likely scary too.

You might find yourself saying and doing things you usually wouldn’t even think to or that you might find abhorrent.

Chances are, deep within, you know what’s going on but can’t put it into words, and feel scared you just can’t hold on, or hold things together any more.

## Thoughts and thinking

It may seem like your thoughts are not you own, or not in language you might typically use.

It may seem like others are able to read your thoughts.

You might feel like a whole bunch of messages are bombarding you or passing through you.

## Visions - seeing what others don’t

Things can certainly get a bit weird, but then the universe is pretty weird.

Quantum physicists have been demonstrating as much for at least a hundred years that this world ain’t quite how it seems, is not quite like the stories we tell ourselves and each other.

Many cultures and traditions have been doing similar for millennia.

## Gripped by ideas and beliefs not shared by others

You might be gripped with a powerful belief and feel compelled to convince others to believe it too.

You likely find the people you talk with dismiss you and your beliefs and ideas, or try to convince you otherwise.

Both will take up a lot of your energy that you might better use in other ways.

It’s ok to have different ideas and beliefs, all the best people do.

## Communicating with those around you

There’s a good chance you’ll find it difficult to talk at all, or that you can’t stop.

When you do, you might find no one around you understands. And when they talk with you it may feel confusing and like every word is another spike in the very fibre of your being, piercing your soul.

NEED TO FEEL SAFE

## Sense of self

When we feel overwhelmed we can become disoriented, it can be difficult keeping track of time. We might lose sense of physical boundaries and our sense of self, who we are. We can become so disoriented we don’t recognise our body or what it’s telling us. We might struggle to stay present, we might feel like we’re in a strange dream or observing ourselves from some distance. We might behave in ways we typically would not or would even recoil from.

## Sleep All Messed-Up

Not sleeping can drive any of us nuts.

Depriving a person of sleep is the basis of torture, it disorients and impairs our abilities to keep mind body soul working together.

## Hearing voices others don’t hear - but that they fear anyway

Some folks believe that just because a person hears voices they are ill - “in psychosis”. Hearing voices that others don’t is remarkably common human experience - about as common left-handedness.

It’s not that long ago that we were also afraid of left-handedness and regarded it as evil too.

Most people who hear voices are fine, even regard it as helpful or somehow life-enriching.

### Voices and Powerlessness

Of course, some people do struggle and some struggle greatly. One common factor amongst people who do struggle is feeling powerless in face of the voices that only they hear.

Hearing voices is not in itself a sign of illness - but it can lead to isolation and **that** can very often lead to a person becoming ill.

When a person is struggling it is often a sign of feeling disempowered: powerless and alone in the world. The voices might be part of how they experience struggling, feeling powerless, helpless, victimised, and unsafe.

Many people who do struggle come to realise how the voices are actually helping them somehow, even if that is the last thing it feels like until we figure things out.

### An intensely personal experience

Voices are often related somehow with life experiences, so voices that are difficult to hear are often related with difficult, painful experiences in the past and the present.

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# What is Psychosis ?

The only honest answer anyone can give to that question is:

“we don’t know.”

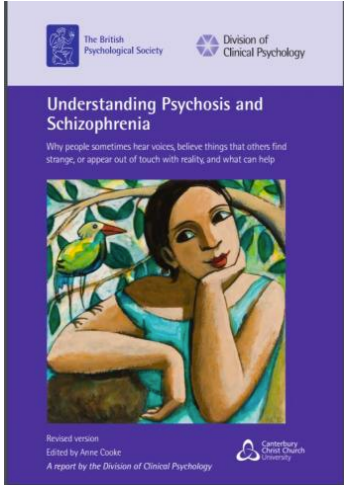
“Psychosis” is a term given to describe when a person is struggling with being in the world.

You might be told you are “losing contact with reality” which doesn’t really mean anything except whatever the person who says it wants it to mean – and that’s usually not good for you.

You’ll likely be told that a person has a “mental illness” called “psychosis” and that it can be treated, usually involving drugs called “antipsychotics”.

This a story, one that some folks find useful but also one many others do not.

Many who experience it are happy to use those terms many others are not and use very different terms.



This document is published by the professional body for Psychologists in UK. Much of what it says aligns with and supports the information in this infosheet.

## Psychotic experiences: everybody has them and so do you

At any point in time one in three of us is having very human experience that is also included in the list of “symptoms” of psychosis”. Some of those symptom are very culturally constructed and interpreted in very different ways in different cultures.

Many are how other people interpret how we are behaving as being outside cultural norms that dominate where we live.

Going Mad is the beginning of a process, it’s not supposed to be the end result...

I NEED TO FEEL SAFE



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## Beware: the danger of a single story

That a person who is struggling has a brain illness and needs lifelong treatment with drugs is a powerful story but it is only one story.

Whether it is this story or any other story, there is always a great danger when we limit ourselves to hearing, telling and believing a single story – especially when it is a story told by others about our lives. There are many stories, here’s a handful. One of these – or some combination might feel like a better fit for you...

## Overwhelmed by life

Can be like a safety valve, a refuge, a retreat from harsh world that can be exhausting and fry our nerves.

We used to call it “breakdown” and realise people needed a break in a simple, safe environment and surrounded by loving care.

These days we call it “crisis” and tell them the need to recover and bounce back.

## Trauma – Woundedness

Trauma means “wound” – what gets called “psychosis” can often be a part of how we experience and respond to being wounded by our experiences in the world.

Trauma is pain. It takes many forms.

At least sometimes, “psychosis” looks a lot like mammalian fight-flight-freeze-fold response.

## Systemic Oppressions

Racism, poverty, especially relative poverty, violence, sexism, all the pressures to conform to others’ ideas of who we’re “supposed” to be. What Bell Hooks calls the “Imperialist White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy”. Some of these effects are so old, so huge they seem invisible, especially when we are lucky enough to not have to think about their impact on us personally every second, personally, but their effects can be soul-crushing.

Holding all that in while we’re trying to be who we are takes a lot. When we succumbing to the pressure borne from being regarded as “too different” we can look like “a fish on a hook”.

## Enrich your story...

### “Reality” leaves a lot to the imagination

~John Lennon

Things can certainly get a bit weird, but then the universe is pretty weird.

There is no single reality determined by some white bloke in a position of power.

Quantum physicists have been demonstrating as much for at least a hundred years now that the world ain’t quite how it seems, and is not quite like the stories we tell ourselves and each other.

Many cultures and traditions have been doing similar for millennia.

### Spirituality

Many Spiritual traditions have been saying much the same for much longer. Experiences listed as “symptoms” of “psychosis” can also be part of spiritual experiences that connect us with higher greater meanings as part of universe, or as breakthrough and transcendence to new meanings and consciousness, helping ground us as part of some greater whole

### The Unconscious, Primordial Mind

Jung called his own experiences his “confrontation with the unconscious”.

Many ancient cultures and traditions around the world value experiences we increasingly label “psychosis” as important and having special meaning, not just for the individual going through it but also for the society they are part of.

### A State of being, one that will pass

One of the scariest things can be thinking feeling and being told this is a one way trip, that has no end.

It is not, and it will.

### In Relationships rather than brain cells

Psychosis exists not within one person but within our relationships with the world, and especially within relationships with other people in our world.

### Madness can be re-generative

“Going mad is the beginning of a process- its not supposed to be the end result”

There have been many words for madness, we know that it can be chaotic and creative, giving birth or rebirth. Sometimes it may be necessary.

Sometimes it can be a perfectly sane response to an insane world.

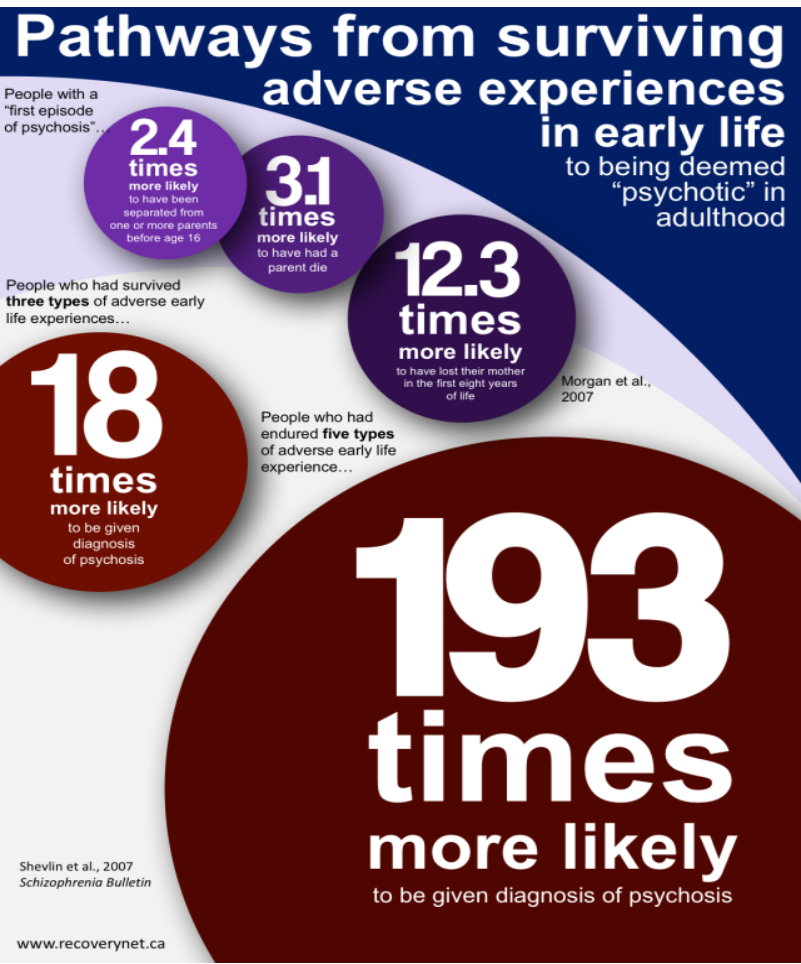
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## Psychosis and adverse experiences

Research shows very powerful connection between adverse experiences especially in early years and struggling later in life sufficient that a clinician gives us a diagnosis that includes what they call “psychosis”.

The more severe the experiences we endure, and the more of them, then the more likely it is we will be given a diagnosis including psychosis in adulthood.

Lately we see drive for this to happens earlier and earlier – many are pushing for screening in teens, even before.



## You and your Body

- Your body might feel strange
  - You might not feel your body
  - You might feel you are outside your body
  - You might feel like others are in your body
  - You might feel others are controlling your body
  - You might feel like your body is full of energy, more than you contain or know what to do with
  - You might feel you have no energy at all, - or both at the same time
  - You might feel like a TV or a tree, or anything but a person
  - You might feel like nothing
  - You might feel like you are “in the ether”
  - You might feel like you are being attacked
  - You might feel like you need to hide
  - You might feel rage and need to hit out
  - You might feel all of these and more, one at time, or all at once
  - You likely feel pretty anxious, unsafe, afraid - and alone

## Finding it hard to feel safe in the world

You might be finding it hard to feel safe, to trust others, to be around others, to be alone, you might feel like running, crying hiding. There’s a good chance you feel scared, terrified, alone.

## First time?

First experiences of what get called “psychosis” or “symptoms” of it can be scary, but they are also remarkably common – one in four of all adults will be experiencing at least one symptom right now.

Part of why it can be scary is the fearing that its a one way street – there will be no coming back, that’s a story, a powerful one but it is also but a story.

### Not a one way journey.

It might be a rough ride, things might be more weird than you think you can handle for a while, but you will get through it.

You already know some stuff that will likely help you. Others who’ve been there might share what they find use.

Many great artists make a living out of going just far enough into states of being that get called psychosis, and coming out with something to share with us about what it means to be human.

## Words and meanings

These days everything gets interpreted through a lens of “mental illness” but it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the etymology – roots and original meanings - of some of the words we use so we don’t allow ourselves to be trapped in the danger of a single story.

Term	Meaning
Psyche	- Soul
Psychosis	- Activity in the soul
Trauma	- Wound, or injury
Psychic trauma	- Wounds in the soul
	William James who first used the term likened it to “Thorns in the Spirit”
Psyche-ache	- Soul-ache, pain in the soul
Psychiatry	- Soul healing





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# Trauma and Psychosis

In simple cause effect terms, “Trauma” is not the cause – the term for that would be *traumatic* - “Trauma” is the effect left within us.

**Trauma means “wound”.**  
Trauma, is the many and varied wounds we carry from the life we’ve lived and our experience in the world.

Trauma is not about remembering a list of what happened to us but experience of being left feeling unsafe, overwhelmed and struggling right now.

Sometimes the link between what we have experienced in the past and that which we experience right now is obvious, though we might not have words to name it. Sometimes the wound is buried deep within us.

Sometimes the truth we live daily is denied by others using their power to quash the truth of what happened, or deny us our voice and deny us our experience right now. All this can in itself be traumatizing, wounding.

As we near our personal limit of what we can hold within, it looks a lot like what gets called “psychosis.”

A person who has been given a diagnosis of **psychosis** is fifteen times more likely to...  
have been abused as a child

We’ve become so used to incorrectly thinking of trauma as the list of events that happened - and as easy-to-recognise initiatory events that shock us, that we discount and ignore the vast range of experiences that can leave us wounded.

And sometimes what happens is so pervasive and so pernicious we might not notice the effect it is having upon us or those around us.

Or we simply don’t have access to words to name it as such, or we have other words imposed upon us.

Nevertheless, structural, social pressures like poverty, especially relative poverty, other factors that exclude groups that deny us ability to express who we are, exert unrelenting pressure to be who we are not, including being told over over, we’re not good enough, if we have no release or are denied our power can leave us struggling in ways that get noticed and called “psychosis”.

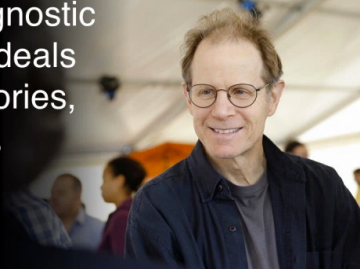
Trauma is not what happens to us but what we hold inside in absence of empathetic witnesses

Peter Levine

The human spirit, soul, psyche is amazingly resilient but at some point we can break down and when we do it looks like what gets called “psychosis”.

Trauma and Psychosis can often be presented as more complex than they are, it might be easier to understand both as meaning something easier to grasp and or imagine: pain.

The diagnostic manual deals in categories, not pain.




Daniel Siegel

**trauma**

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections.

Judith Herman, MD  
Trauma & Recovery



Life, lifecrap, and living in a cage

What happens after whatever happened to us is often more significant-

if we have our experience denied, if others use their power to silence us we can be rendered powerless, become disconnected from community leaving us no recourse but to hold the pain inside us.

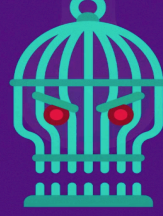
When we do express it our behavior is deemed inappropriate or beyond the bounds of what is socially acceptable.

If we came from a different culture our way of expressing may be at odds with the culture we now find ourselves in.

If we are cut off by our culture from connecting with others, from acting in ways that release the energy within us, and that reinforce our strengths, connectedness, our resilience and our collective ability to get through even the toughest of experiences then we adapt as best we know how by ourselves in order to survive.

“Only two types of animal can be traumatised, animals kept in cages by humans, and humans - because of course we live in culturally constructed cages”

It's the cage



“Colonialism is a process of coming to see and to define “others” as primitive, in need of the benefits of Western-European civilization and living with unexploited resources and opportunities.”

Frank Tester

Colonialism is a factory in which madness is manufactured




Achille Mbembe

Frantz Fanon wrote of the psychological and psychiatric impacts on colonized and colonizer:

It seems to us that the events giving rise to disorder within are chiefly the bloodthirsty and pitiless atmosphere, the generalization of inhuman practices, and the firm impression that people have of being caught up in a veritable Apocalypse.

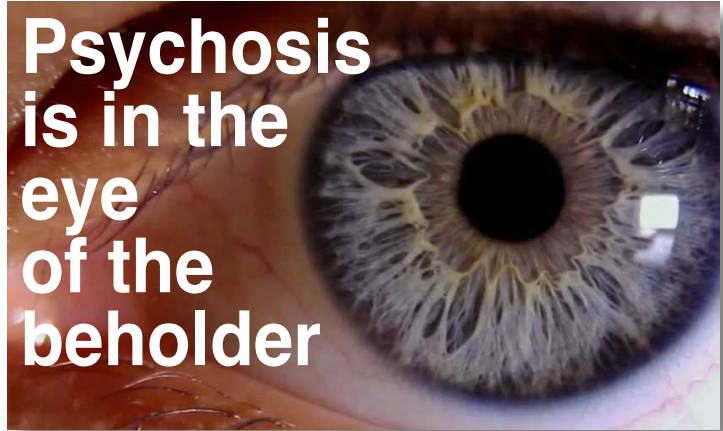
Frantz Fanon





# Psychosis 2.0

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Sometimes we see a person behaving in a way that leaves us feeling scared, we feel anxious or unsafe, perceive danger, perceive them as dangerous.

Chances are they feel scared too.

Sometimes someone behaves in a way that seems bizarre to us, we might call them crazy.

A clinician will look through their clinician lens, listen through a checklist, like they’re some buzzword bingo, listening for specific signs, checking-off on their checklist of signs that they choose to interpret as problems, as “symptoms” of “disorder”. Then, when they spot enough will diagnose the person – set them apart – deem them “psychotic”.

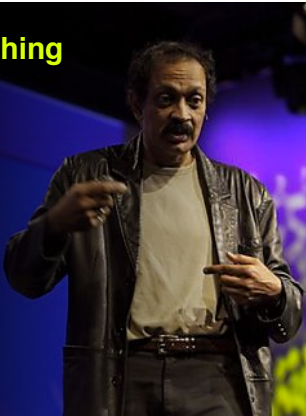
### What if...

- What if we could learn to listen differently?
- What if we could really listen?
- What if we could listen with our heart, our bones?
- What if we could listen so we could feel their pain?
- What if we could listen so we could see the hook?

When someone says something that we don’t understand it doesn’t mean they’re crazy,

it means we’re not smart enough to understand.

V.S. Ramachandran



Listening

is such a simple act

It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don't have to do anything else.

If we can do that, we create moments in which real healing is available.

We don't have to advise, or coach, or sound wise.

We just have to be willing to sit there and listen

- Margaret Wheatley

## Listening is healing.

When we listen without listening for problems we hear the story, of person’s life their struggle, their pain. We also hear them and, if we do it well, they might feel heard, and if we do it really well they might feel felt.

# Fish on a hook

Imagine for a moment that you are a fish, in amongst other fish, doing fishy things, just like all the other fish. Then, one day one of your fellow fishy friends starts to behave in way that seems a little odd, out of the ordinary, a bit different. At some point other fish start distancing themselves, tutting, leaving space between themselves and your friend. There’ll be and disapproving looks and the fish-whispering and much fish-tweeting starts up, and none of it is good.

Then your friend starts to behave in decidedly odd ways that, by now, pretty much all the other fishes notice and clearly disapprove of. Your friend is being separated from the shoal, clearly not welcome and all the fish distance themselves more and more, joining with the chorus:

“what’s wrong with you!!?” “you’re not one of us” and calling him names: “crazy fish!!!”

No one is seeing through their own fear, no one is looking closely enough to sense your friend’s pain, no one sees the hook on which this odd fish, your friend, is caught.

If they did, then they’d see your friend in great pain and they’d see them struggling for their life, alone, whilst everyone else is yelling at them, calling them names, yelling, telling them what they need to do All just so they can get back to being undisturbed themselves -get back to their normal everyday business of being a “normal” fish.

### What if that fish were you?

Karl Menninger often used this metaphor: “An individual having unusual difficulties in coping with his environment struggles and kicks up the dust, as it were. I have used the figure of a fish caught on a hook: his gyrations must look peculiar to other fish that don’t understand the circumstances; but his splashes are not his affliction, they are his effort to get rid of his affliction and as every fisherman knows these efforts may succeed.”

It’s been interpreted and turned into a short animation at [www.animatedminds.com](http://www.animatedminds.com).





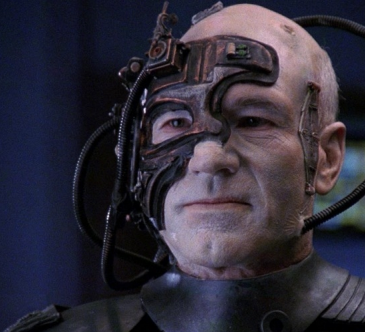
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Let’s  
get real  
about  
‘reality’

Many of us will be said to have “lost touch with reality”. Yet scientists in all fields are coming to realise that “reality” is at least partly formed by whoever observes it, and how. Indeed, it could be said that an observer who tells another person that they are “disconnected from reality” is themselves, disconnected from how reality really is.

RESISTANCE  
IS NOT  
FUTILE

ARGUING  
ABOUT WHAT'S  
"REAL"  
IS.




When one human being tells another what is real what they are actually doing is making a demand for obedience

Humberto Maturana



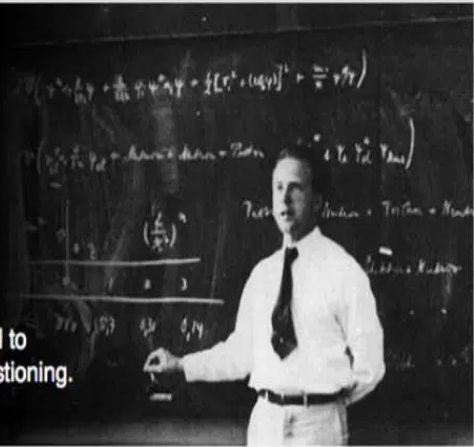
Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real.

Niels Bohr



What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.

Werner Heisenberg





How we gaze upon the world shapes what we are able to see.



Since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes with which we see reality.

Nikos Kanzantzakis

story  
changes  
reality

Ben Okra

reality leaves a lot  
to the imagination

John Lennon

