

## Dealing with episodic behaviour resulting from mental illness

TAFE NSW is committed to providing quality education. Its student population is diverse and the organisation has a proud record of achievement especially in the provision of support services for students with disabilities. More than 1 in 5 of the population will experience a mental illness at some stage in their lives. Young adults, 18 – 24 years, have the highest prevalence. In quite a few instances more serious mental illness first develops in this group. Psychiatric disability includes eating disorders, depression, stress disorders and psychotic disorders. People living with a mental illness, particularly a psychotic disorder, are at higher risk of completing suicide.

Psychosis is a term used to describe a range of conditions that affect the mind. These conditions lead to a loss of touch with reality and / or distorted perceptions. People who have a psychotic disorder at times experience what are called psychotic episodes. Symptoms include confused thinking, false beliefs (delusions), hallucinations, disordered feelings such as anxiety/agitation, and changes in behaviour. These may emerge in response to stress, drug use or social changes.

Following medical assessment, treatment may involve medication, counselling and psychological therapy, hospitalisation and social support. Some people recover quickly or have long periods between episodes. Others may need ongoing treatment and support.

### Supporting a person experiencing a psychotic episode

It can be challenging, frustrating and even frightening dealing with a student who is experiencing a psychotic episode. It is important to remember that a person who is unwell is often unable to behave in a way that would be expected. Whereas there are no strict rules as to how to respond supportively to someone who is acutely unwell – as each person and situation is different – the following ideas may be useful:

- Be yourself.
- Reassure the student and try to persuade them to move to a more private area.
- Gain information. Students do not have to disclose a condition but if the student is willing to confide, knowledge of expected symptoms may be helpful for managing behaviour or arranging a referral.
- Remember to keep a non-threatening demeanour and body language such as side-on posture. Some eye contact is good but not intense 'eyeballing'.
- As psychotic symptoms may be distressing, accept that you may have a range of feelings in response: fear, shock, anger, frustration or sadness. Try not to take it personally. It is important to find support for yourself.
- Most people experiencing psychotic symptoms fear others more than others fear them. Likewise, the vast majority of such people are of no danger to anyone else.
- A person having acute psychotic symptoms may be fixed in their beliefs and ideas. Avoid disagreement or long discussions. Listen with sympathy to gain understanding.
- If behaviour has a significant disruptive effect on the class or is offensive it may become a disciplinary matter. In the first instance however, attempt to refer the person to the college Counsellor or an appropriate Teacher Consultant. If this is not possible it may be necessary to call Security – giving them any information that they may need to know to manage the situation. Incidents need to be reported to head teachers and management.
- Before you apply the discipline policy, you should consider your obligations under the Disability Standards for Education 2005, in relation to the provision of reasonable adjustments.
- Remember that safety for you, the class and the person experiencing symptoms is the priority consideration.

For further information refer to: TAFE Teacher Consultants for students with psychiatric disability, TAFE Counsellors, and TAFE NSW brochure – *Mental Illness Awareness – some advice and strategies for teachers.*