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Psychosis in children could be prevented with cognitive behavioural therapy, reveals Manchester university study

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By Suraj Radia

Delusions, hallucinations and hearing things that aren't there could be reduced in high risk youngsters if they received the right treatment early on, Manchester experts claim.

The development of psychosis – which includes visual hallucinations and delusional beliefs – was more than halved with early access of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in a recent study.

The research, conducted by the University of Manchester, found CBT was effective when received six, 12 and 18-24 months after treatment started.

Dr Paul Hutton, who led the research, said: "Our research suggests that young people seeking help who are at risk of developing psychosis should now be offered a package of care which includes at least six months of CBT.

"There was no evidence that CBT had adverse effects, although we argue future clinical trials should measure this more thoroughly.

"Our analysis also suggests that existing CBT approaches may need to be adapted to focus more on improving social and occupational functioning."

The research team – from the School of Psychological Science and the Psychosis Research Unit at Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust – analysed previous studies which covered 800 people at high risk of developing psychosis.

Patients were randomly assigned to receive either CBT or a control diagnosis, which was either normal treatment or supportive counselling.

CBT involves helping people directly understand how their interpretation and response to their experiences can determine how distressing or disabling they are.

Through the therapy, patients learn a range of strategies they can use to reduce their distress, allowing them to work towards a meaningful recovery.

CBT for psychosis prevention places a heavy emphasis on 'normalising' and de-stigmatising experiences such as hearing voices or having paranoid thoughts.

The study, published in Psychological Medicine, adds weight to earlier research from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence and university researcher Professor Tony Morrison.

The University of Manchester has played an important role in the development of CBT, with Professor Morrison and colleagues pioneering its use for psychosis prevention and conducting the first clinical trials in this area in 1999.

Picture courtesy of JP Martineau, with thanks.

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