

# Occupational Therapy for Psychosis: Tips and Strategies



**EASA** Center for Excellence

Young people experiencing psychosis can encounter challenges in staying involved with the activities meaningful to them. These activities include school, work, friends, family, and fun.

Occupational Therapy (OT) is a field dedicated to helping engage in the satisfying occupations. Since its emergence as a discipline, OT has contributed to the rehabilitation of people experiencing mental health conditions.



At EASA, OTs collaborate with the young people and their family/support systems to provide individualized assessment and intervention. As a key part of multi-disciplinary clinical teams, they often provide consultation for other members (such as advising on educational and vocational supports). They place special emphasis on sensory processing and sensory modulation techniques to alleviate distress caused by psychosis-related sensory sensitivity.

Below is a list of tips and strategies from EASA OTs to help support young people experiencing psychosis. These tips may not be appropriate for everyone, but can be a useful starting point for brainstorming what will fit each person's unique needs.

## **For parents and guardians:**

- **Be aware of cognitive difficulties.** Young people experiencing psychosis often have cognitive symptoms that make it difficult for them to concentrate, remember details, and follow complex sequences. It's important to understand that these are usually *symptoms* and not *behaviors*.
- **Break down sequences.** These cognitive symptoms can make doing daily activities like homework and chores very overwhelming. Simplify tasks into one-at-a-time steps. Example: turn "clean your room" into "put the clothes on your bed into a basket."
- **Use lists and reminders.** Sticker notes, charts, calendars, lists, and pictures can go a long way in accommodating memory issues. Example: Help your young person set up automated reminders on their cell phone or computer.

However, too many reminders can be overwhelming. Keep lists short and language simple.

- **Be aware of sensory sensitivities.** Young people experiencing psychosis are often sensitive to sensory inputs like light, sounds, and tactile sensations. Activities like being in a crowd or taking a shower can be overwhelming and even painful. One EASA participant described taking a shower as like “getting stabbed by needles.”
- **Modify the environment to reduce sensory overload.** Create a quiet space in the home where the young person can go to recover. Get light-cancelling curtains and noise-cancelling earplugs. If you ask the young person to go to the store, let them go at night when it’s quiet.

### **For young people:**

- **Use music or soothing sounds to block out unwanted noise.** Example: If you know that loud traffic triggers your voices, drown it out with your favorite song.
- **Block out unwanted light.** When you’re feeling overwhelmed, find a dark quiet space. Use sunglasses, hats, and light-cancelling curtains.
- **Take baths instead of showers.** Many young people with psychosis find taking showers to be too loud and uncomfortable. Baths can be a more relaxing alternative.
- **Find ways to be social that don’t stress you out.** When you hang out with friends, pick people and locations that reduce your stress. If a busy mall is too much, go to a park instead. If you don’t feel ready to talk face-to-face, talk on the phone, text, or e-mail.
- **Use recording tools.** Get a tape and/or video recorder, or use a recording app/software. This can help you:
  - Keep track of details (recording classes, giving yourself reminders)
  - Check what’s real and what’s not. If you don’t know whether something you’re hearing or seeing is real, you can take a video or audio clip and see if it’s still there on replay.

### **For teachers:**

- **Give students experiencing psychosis accommodations that help them succeed.** These can include:
  - Give students extra time to complete work.
  - Help reduce distractions (allow segregated testing or students to go to a quiet place to concentrate).
  - Give instructions for assignments in multiple formats (written and verbal).
  - Assign a note taker or provide the student with your notes so that the student can focus on what’s being said in lectures.

- Have a plan for students to take a break if needed (go to the library or study hall).
- Record class lectures and review after class.
- If assignments require students to do something that triggers their symptoms (being in very loud crowded spaces, public speaking), allow for an alternative assignment (writing a paper instead of giving a speech).