

Psychosis / We need each other

Tammy: Have you ever said, 'I think I'm going crazy' or 'You're driving me mad'. Maybe you've thought someone was crazy or mad. I wonder what those words mean to you. But what does 'crazy' really mean? Stay with us...

Carol: Hello, my friend. I'm Carol, and Tammy and I are so happy to be with you again. And our good friend Fran is here as well. She has worked in a psychiatric hospital for 25 years, so she's seen a lot of people that you might call 'crazy'. Welcome, Fran.

Fran: Thanks Carol. And hello to you. I wonder what you would say about someone who sees things and hears things that no-one else can: who believes he is being followed by enemies, who talks in a jumble of words that don't make sense? Would you think he was seeing visions, or was a special person, or was possessed by spirits? Would you think he was dangerous, or sick? He could be any of those things, but it's most likely that he has a mental illness. That's what I want to talk about today. By the way, we don't really say 'crazy'; there's a proper word for it- psychosis. Spelt PSYCHOSIS. And it means that a person has lost touch with what's real. Instead they have their own kind of reality that others can't share. And it stops them living their lives well in the community.

Carol: OK, so what sort of things do people with psychosis experience? What's it like for them?

Fran: Let me tell you about my friend Mo. When he was about 17 he tried some drugs, especially marijuana. He started just using it at weekends, but before long he was smoking marijuana every day. And then his family noticed that he was staying in his room, and not going to college, and he started saying strange things. He talked as though he could see things that they couldn't- spiders, and blood on the walls, and eyes in the roof.

Carol: That would be so scary!

Fran: Yes, scary for Mo...and his family. Mo thought people were trying to poison him, so he would only eat food from cans that he opened himself. He would mutter words, often very fast, and he hardly slept. *Mo's* psychosis was caused by *drugs*. In the hospital where I work, most of the young people who have psychosis have been using drugs. This is important to know, and if anyone in your

family has any mental illness, please be very careful about taking *any* drugs that affect your mind or drinking alcohol.

Tammy: Does the psychosis stop when they stop using drugs?

Fran: Sometimes, but sometimes not. Some people only ever have psychosis once or twice. But other people will develop a disease called schizophrenia. That happened to Mo's friend Tony.

Schizophrenia is not always due to drugs or anything that the patient has done. It's not caused by germs, or by bad parents. Often it appears after a time of stress, but stress by itself doesn't cause it. It just happens to people who are vulnerable to it. Something went wrong in Tony's brain, some change in the chemistry of his brain. He had hallucinations, seeing things that were not there, and he heard voices in his head telling him he was evil and should die. He believed that there were special messages coming out of the radio just for him, and that he had special powers. He was suspicious of everyone, and he couldn't go to his classes.

It's sad that schizophrenia most often strikes young people in their late teens or early twenties. They might experience these scary sorts of symptoms several times, and usually they need to take medicine to get better.

Then often something else happens. They might not be out of touch with reality, but they can't be bothered getting up, looking after themselves, or going to work. They might not be so distressed any more, but often they don't feel anything much, their feelings are numb.

Carol: So, if a person has these symptoms does that mean they have schizophrenia, or can there be other causes?

Fran: Yes, other mental illnesses can sometimes cause psychosis, if they are severe. When a person has been addicted to drugs or alcohol, they can get hallucinations when they stop taking the drugs.

These psychotic problems can also be caused by extreme trauma, or stress, or grief. But then the symptoms will go away when the situation improves. With schizophrenia, it comes back and can really destroy a person's personality. It's very hard for them, and for their families.

Carol: It must be awful for them. And scary for other people.

Fran: Psychosis of any sort is very frightening for the sufferer, and they can get very agitated, but usually they would not want to hurt anyone else but themselves. You might see movies about mad men with axes, but really, that's very uncommon. In 25 years in psychiatric hospitals I've only felt a bit unsafe once or twice, and I've never been hurt. If they are violent, it's because they feel trapped. Try to see it from their point of view! Their world is very dangerous and confusing.

Tammy: I can see that we need to understand their lives, not be frightened or hate them. What can be done to help, Fran?

Fran: Well, in a crisis where a person is not thinking clearly at all, it's best not to argue or threaten them. Remember, they are living in their own world and seeing things very differently. So don't grab them or try to hold them down, unless they're going to harm themselves or someone else. Just talk quietly, try to look calm, listen well to what they say, and give them plenty of space and quiet. Call for help if you feel unsafe. They need medical help first of all.

Tammy: What sort of medical help? Do you mean tablets or injections?

Fran: Yes, something to make them calm and able to sleep. That's what happened for Mo. The nurse came every day and gave him tablets, and after a few weeks he was much more like his old self. But it was hard for him to accept that he could never take drugs like marijuana again. So far he is doing well, but his family are always watching for any signs of trouble.

Sometimes these medicines are only needed for a short time. Other people might need to take tablets for the rest of their lives. Tablets can make a big difference and let people with mental illnesses have good lives. Tony has an injection every month and his father makes sure he doesn't forget. Tony sees his doctor each month to check how he's going - that's really important.

Carol: So, medicine is the answer?

Fran: In the crisis, it probably is the best thing. But it's important for people with this illness to have counseling with someone who understands, someone who can help them to understand their condition and manage their daily lives. Their family and friends can be a big help too, if they don't

blame the person for the illness, but encourage them to be active. Tony would still rather stay in bed in the morning, but his friend comes every day and they walk to their workplace together, and they play cricket on Saturdays.

Tony's family found that he manages better if the house is tidy and quiet. He gets confused sometimes and it's good to write down for him what's happening, where he needs to go, or who's coming to visit him. When he's not well, he sometimes thinks the doctor or nurse is going to hurt him. So at those times his father and mother explain who they are, and they stay with him. They tell him before they do anything noisy so he won't get a fright. And he's doing well now!

Carol: Today on Women of Hope Fran's been talking about psychosis, which we sometimes call 'going crazy'. We talked about what to do in the crisis time. But let's talk about what happens later.

Fran: After a psychotic event, a person usually feels very anxious about the future, and powerless. They don't feel good about themselves at all. They feel that people won't like them, and that they're a burden to their family. I would say: 'Your illness is not the most important thing about you. You're still a valuable person. There are things you can do to contribute, and ways to keep yourself well.'

Carol: Fran, are there things that help a person recover from this kind of illness?

Fran: Yes, definitely. It really helps if they have a strong family and friends who stay loyal to them. They need a secure place to live, and useful things to do. That might be a job like hanging out the washing. They need to be able to talk about their feelings. It's really important for them to exercise, eat well, and stay away from alcohol or drugs.

Unfortunately, they *don't* feel like doing these things, so the family needs to be patient and encouraging. If they have medicine prescribed by the doctor, they really need to take it properly, or they will probably get sick again. But please, don't give up hope. People with psychosis can be helped. Their lives might be different to what they planned, but they can still be happy and have good lives.

If they have a faith in God, and they pray and ask God for help each day, that makes such a difference. But when they're having psychotic symptoms, they often get very mixed up about God, so it's probably best to pray for them separately, and just tell them God cares for them.

It can be very difficult for families to cope with a son or daughter they love, who can be very unlovable at these times. Please, if you know families with mentally ill members, don't shun them or blame them. Give them all the love and help you can. It's not their fault!

Fran: On Women of Hope today we've talked about helping people with mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, and I mentioned Tony. Tony used to come to church, and sometimes he would act strangely, so that some people were a bit afraid of him. Some even said that we should not let him come to church. But the church leaders said, 'No, Tony is one of God's special children, and we have to take him to our hearts. He loves God, and God loves him, and he is part of God's family. God has given him to us for a reason.' So when Tony came, one of his friends always sat beside him and calmed him down if he got upset. When we got to know him, we realised that he was a very gentle person. He loved children and was very good with them.

Tony came to the Bible Study group that met in our house each Wednesday. He couldn't concentrate for long, but he asked very good questions. Sometimes he really surprised us with his comments. It seemed he understood God's love better than most of us. One day he said, 'I've lost most of my friends because of my schizophrenia, and I can't seem to keep a job for very long. But Jesus is my best friend. He's always with me whatever anyone else thinks about me.'

Tony wasn't psychotic when he said this. He was just explaining the love that he felt each day from Jesus Christ, who came to show us what God is really like. Tony really helped the rest of our group to understand God better. Even at times when Tony was mentally ill, he still knew Jesus was with him and it helped him to talk about this. Jesus was like the anchor of his life, the one person he could rely on.

Tammy: That's really true, isn't it? Whatever's going on, whatever other people say, we can be sure that Jesus is with us, if we've asked him to be the Lord of our lives.

Carol: That reminds me of the words of Jesus, when he said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'

Did you learn some new things about how to help people with a psychotic illness? Fran was just talking about Tony, and how he knew Jesus was with him.

Fran: Yes, Tony was a blessing to our group. He helped us to really understand something in the Bible. Let me explain.

I've been telling you stories lately about a man named Paul, who travelled about preaching the message about Jesus Christ, in the years after Jesus went back to heaven.

Tammy: Oh yes, I remember he saw a vision of Jesus who spoke to him. That wasn't psychosis; was it Fran?

Fran: No, not at all. He wasn't sick, he could think clearly and organise his life well, but now he had a new goal in life, to spread God's message.

Well, people believed in Jesus and trusted him to forgive their sins. They wanted to worship God together and learn about Jesus, and support each other. So they met together in groups, which became churches. I'm not talking about church buildings, but groups of believers. Paul visited these groups, and he also wrote letters to them. Now those letters are part of the Bible, God's words to us.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth (I Cor 12). He was sad because they were splitting into groups, following different leaders, and boasting about the special gifts and abilities they had. And just like us, they weren't perfect either!

Paul talked to them first about their physical bodies. He wrote: "The body isn't made up of only one part, but of many parts. If the foot says, 'I'm not a hand, so I don't belong to the body,' that wouldn't keep it from being part of the body. If the ear says, 'Because I'm not an eye, I'm not part of the body', that wouldn't stop it from being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, how could it hear? If the body were one huge ear, how could it smell? No, God made the body with many different parts, all making up one perfect body. So the eye can't say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' No, we can't do without the parts of the body that seem to be weaker, and those parts of the body that we think don't look so nice, we treat with special care and modesty... So there is no argument or division in the body; all the different parts look after each other. If one part is hurting, all the other parts hurt with it, don't they? Well, you Christ-followers are the body of Christ on earth, and every one of you is part of it."

Carol: These are interesting words that Paul shares. What do you think he means? He says the physical body needs every part, (toes, arms, feet..) and looks after the parts that need special protection; like our eyes. Then he says that the church, the group of people who follow Jesus, is like a body made of many members, and we all need each other. We can't argue about who is most important - we're *all* important! The preacher isn't more important than the person who sweeps the floor. The person who understands the Bible well isn't more important than the youngest children.

Tammy: And it sounds like Paul is saying that the people who need special care are just as important as those who seem strong.

Fran: Or maybe they're more important. Paul wrote, 'God has put the body together in such a way as to give *greater* honour to those parts that need more care.' God wants us to really care for each other, especially the person with special needs. He wants us to understand that we each have value.

Tammy: That's not surprising, because *God* loves and cares for each one of us. He doesn't love us less if we are weak, or have a mental illness, for example.

Fran: God isn't just telling us to care for our weaker members. He's telling us that we really *need* them to receive the things *they* can offer us. They're often strong in *different* ways, because they have to live bravely with big problems. I told you how Tony taught our group to appreciate God's love in a new way. And children often help us to see things more clearly, don't they?

Carol: And Fran, I was thinking, that we also need all sorts of people so we can show by example what God is like. Since we are Jesus' 'body' on earth, that means we should act like Jesus did. He loved children and cared for them, and for women, and outcasts, and sick people. When we have people with special needs in our group, we have a chance to act more like Jesus.

Fran: Yes; and that's our goal when we start to follow Jesus...to be more like him.

Tammy: So if you know someone with mental illness, do you think you can be their friend, and show them how much God loves them? If you do, you might be surprised how much they help *you* to learn and grow.

Carol: We need to go now. Thank you for spending this time with us. We'll be praying for you.

We do hope you will be with us again. Have a great week filled with God's blessings.