

Half of Dutch teenagers regularly have a mild psychotic experience: study

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Mild psychotic experiences, such as delusive ideas or moderate feelings of paranoia, regularly occur among adolescents. Of the almost 7700 Dutch young people aged 12 to 16 years who were investigated by NWO researcher Hanneke Wigman during her doctoral research, about 40% reported that they often had such an experience. Wigman will defend her doctorate on Friday 16 September at Utrecht University.

There are five types of 'mild psychotic experiences' according to the researcher: [hallucinations](#), delusions, [paranoia](#), megalomania and paranormal convictions. Examples are hearing voices, the feeling that thoughts are being taken out of your head or the feeling that people are acting differently from what they are. These experiences are milder in nature than those of a psychosis, one of the most severe [psychiatric disorders](#).

Using self-reports, Hanneke Wigman compared the prevalence of such psychotic experiences in teenagers (12-16 years) and adult women (18-45 years). This revealed that about 40% of the teenagers regularly have at least one of the five forms of psychotic experience, compared to just 2% of the adult women. The researcher also noticed the differences between [teenage boys](#) and [teenage girls](#). For example, megalomania was reported more often by boys than girls. Hallucinations, delusions, paranoia and paranormal convictions occurred more among girls.

Typical for adolescence

The research results suggest that mild psychotic experiences are typical for adolescence. 'Adolescence is a period in which feelings of uncertainty play a role. [Young people](#) become more aware of themselves and are often sensitive for their changing [social environment](#). That makes them more susceptible to paranoid thoughts and observations, for example,' explains Hanneke Wigman.

[Adolescents](#) find it harder than adults to distinguish between important and unimportant internal and external stimuli. This means, for example, that they are more susceptible to hallucinations. Wigman has also shown that the mild psychotic experiences undergone can change during adolescence. 'Some young people have many such experiences at the start of adolescence that decrease later in adolescence, but there are also young people who experience it the other way round,' says the researcher.

Persistent

For most young people, mild psychotic experiences are transient in nature. If young people experience something like that then they do not need to panic according to the researcher. 'But,' says Wigman, 'if the symptoms persist or other symptoms develop in conjunction with these then help should be sought.' This is because the researcher discovered that under certain conditions, such as cannabis use, the bottling up of problems, genetic susceptibility or a traumatic event, psychotic experiences can persist. Such persistent experiences in young people increase the risk of a psychosis or depression at a later age.

New group in view

With her research, Wigman has gained a better understanding of the group of adolescents who have persistent mild psychotic experiences but

nevertheless belong to the normal population (they have not been admitted to a clinic, for example). This group did not receive sufficient attention during previous research into psychosis. That is because to date, the researchers mainly focused on people with a ‘particularly high risk’ of developing a psychosis or people who had already experienced one or more psychoses. A greater focus on intervention in the group of people with persistent psychotic experiences could lead to the postponement, alleviation or even prevention of a psychosis at a later age.

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