

Stress Management & First-Episode Psychosis

Managing stress matters for everyone — but for people in early psychosis, it matters even more. Stress directly affects symptoms in biological, not just emotional, ways. Understanding this changes how you can respond.

“Stress isn’t just something that makes life harder — during early psychosis, it can directly worsen symptoms. The good news is that managing it is something you can learn, with the right support.”

SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO KNOW

Stress doesn’t just make you feel worse — it can directly worsen psychotic symptoms by lowering the threshold at which the brain produces them. This is not your fault.

WHY IT MATTERS WITH FEP

People in early psychosis are more sensitive to everyday stress than most, not because they’re weaker, but because of real biological changes happening in the brain during this time.

THE GOOD NEWS

Managing stress is one of the most evidence-backed ways to support recovery, and small, consistent practices make a real difference over time.

WHAT’S ACTUALLY HAPPENING

- 1 Stress and psychosis have a biological link.** Research shows that stress activates the brain’s dopamine system — the same system involved in psychosis. High or chronic stress can lower the threshold at which symptoms appear or worsen.
- 2 Your stress response may be more sensitive right now.** During early psychosis, the brain’s stress response system (the HPA axis) is often overactive. This means everyday stressors — things others might brush off — can feel much bigger and more overwhelming.
- 3 Stress is a common trigger for relapse.** Significant life stressors — family conflict, academic pressure, relationship problems, and financial stress — are among the most consistently identified triggers for the return or worsening of psychotic episodes.
- 4 Managing stress can directly reduce symptoms.** Evidence from CBT and mindfulness studies shows that learning to manage stress responses leads to meaningful improvements in psychotic symptoms. It’s a treatment target, not just self-care.

WHAT MIGHT HELP

LEARN TO NOTICE YOUR STRESS EARLY

Identifying stress before it builds is more effective than managing it after it’s high. Notice your early warning signs — physical tension, poor sleep, irritability, or withdrawal — and respond before things escalate.

TALK TO YOUR CARE TEAM ABOUT STRESSORS

Your team can help you identify your personal triggers and develop targeted strategies to manage them. This is a core part of psychosis treatment — not an add-on. Don’t wait until things feel unmanageable.

USE YOUR BODY TO REGULATE YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Slow breathing, gentle movement, cold water, and walking — these directly activate the body’s calming response. You don’t have to feel calm first; these techniques work even when everything feels difficult.

REDUCE WHERE YOU CAN, ACCEPT WHERE YOU CAN’T

Some stressors can be reduced or avoided. Others can’t. Knowing the difference helps — trying to control things that can’t be controlled adds stress rather than reducing it. Your team can help you work this through.

This isn’t about being weak

Being more sensitive to stress during FEP is a biological reality, not a personal failing. Understanding this makes it easier to ask for help and be kinder to yourself.

Simple practices add up

You don’t need a formal program to start. Regular sleep, movement, reducing caffeine, and time with safe people all lower your overall stress load over time.

CBT and mindfulness really work

CBT for psychosis (CBTp) and mindfulness-based approaches have strong evidence for reducing both stress and symptoms. Ask your team what’s available to you.