



RESPONDING TO ATS RELATED MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS*

For some individuals, the use of amphetamine type stimulants can result in mental health concerns such as panic attacks, paranoid ideation and psychosis. The following information highlights the support and assistance frontline workers may offer the individual experiencing an ATS related mental health crisis until appropriate treatment can be accessed.

THE ROLE OF FRONTLINE SERVICES

- › Staff of frontline services are often the first people to identify possible signs and symptoms of a mental health concern
 - › Some mental health concerns can be directly related to, or exacerbated by, drug and/or alcohol use, including ATS
 - › In some instances, the individual may not be aware that they are unwell or they may be self medicating with licit or illicit drugs to mask their symptoms
 - › Professional medical or psychiatric help may not be accessible in an immediate situation of crisis or as concerns develop
 - › Due to the associated stigma, many people are reluctant to discuss their mental health concerns (particularly where related to illicit drug use) therefore if, as a worker, you possess the skills to identify and raise such issues in a non-judgmental manner, it can make the process of discussion and help seeking much easier for the individual
- › Listen in a non-judgmental manner, feeding back with reassurance
 - › If you know the person is having a panic attack reassure them with this information. Explain that the unpleasant sensations will soon stop and he or she will recover fully
 - › Assure the person you will stay with them and keep them safe until the attack stops
 - › The symptoms of a panic attack and a heart attack can be similar. If you do not know what is wrong, or are unsure, call an ambulance immediately.

ATS INDUCED PSYCHOSIS

Determining whether a psychosis is the result of schizophrenia or ATS use can be difficult as many of the symptoms are similar. In responding to an individual who appears to be experiencing psychosis, ensuring the safety of the individual, yourself and others, is more important than determining cause or diagnosis.

The following symptoms are common in ATS induced psychosis:

- › Paranoid ideation; for example the individual may feel suspicious of those around them, they may believe people are following them or plotting to harm them. This paranoia, and associated feelings of persecution and threat, can make the individual very defensive and potentially hostile

ATS RELATED PANIC ATTACKS

Panic attacks are a relatively common adverse response of ATS toxicity. If you know the individual is experiencing a panic attack the best thing you can do is to stay with them and offer plenty of reassurance.

- › If possible, assist the individual to move to a quiet, safe place away from excessive stimuli
- › Help to calm the person by encouraging slow, relaxed breathing in unison with your own

- › Delusions; the individual may experience extreme beliefs unsupported by evidence, for instance they may believe they are invincible or they may believe their thoughts are exceptional
- › Hallucinations; the individual may see, hear, smell or feel things that other people cannot. This can include tactile hallucinations, such as formication, the sensation that insects are crawling under their skin. ATS induced psychosis may also cause people to hear voices or see things out of the corner of their eye (peripheral hallucinations).

Open discussion is the most effective way to uncover these symptoms. Allow the person to feel comfortable enough to disclose symptoms. Ask about details in a way that indicates that you accept and understand they are experiencing these symptoms and reflect feelings back appropriately without reinforcing these symptoms, for example: 'That must make you feel scared'.

The symptoms of ATS induced psychosis usually resolve within hours to days after ceasing use (depending on the amount and length of use and whether or not the individual has a pre-existing mental health issue). This can be a very stressful and frightening time and the individual may worry that their ATS use will lead to a permanent psychotic disorder. Workers should provide reassurance that these symptoms will pass. On recovery, the individual should be advised that regular breaks from ATS use (as opposed to binge use) and improved self-care, including rest and nutrition, will help to alleviate unwanted symptoms of intoxication and withdrawal. Secondary consultation and/or referral to treatment services can be employed if greater support is needed.

PSYCHOTIC EPISODES; IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS:

- › Always assess risk of harm to the individual, yourself and others. If someone is at risk of being hurt, call 000 for emergency services
- › If you judge it safe, approach the individual and ask what their concern is and offer assistance
- › Remain respectful, courteous and non-threatening in your voice and stance, whilst being honest and direct

- › Listen non-judgmentally and accept that what they are experiencing is very real for them
- › Be reassuring whilst, clarifying and addressing what the individual sees as the major issues rather than what you, the worker, see as the major concerns
- › Avoid verbal confrontation where possible
- › Avoid physical confrontation unless necessary to prevent harm
- › Avoid excessive stimuli, such as busy or noisy waiting rooms
- › If the individual appears to be experiencing paranoia, avoid maintaining eye contact and frequent use of their name, as this may exacerbate persecutory ideation
- › Call your local Mental Health Crisis Team or service for their help or advice. If not applicable, contact emergency services
- › Finally, if an incident is traumatic for you, or you feel anxious or distressed, discuss these issues with a supervisor or colleague. Debriefing is recommended in any event of mental health crisis.

Take any threats or warnings seriously, particularly if the person believes they are being persecuted. If you are concerned for your personal safety, seek outside help. **You should never put yourself at risk.** Similarly, if the person's aggression escalates beyond control at any time, you should remove yourself from the situation and call emergency services (eg mental health crisis team or police). When contacting the appropriate mental health service, you should not assume the person is experiencing a psychotic episode but should rather outline any relevant signs and symptoms and immediate concerns.

** This information utilises core principles within the Mental Health First Aid course developed by Betty Kitchener and Anthony Jorm. The document has been tailored to meet the specific needs of frontline services working with people who use ATS.*