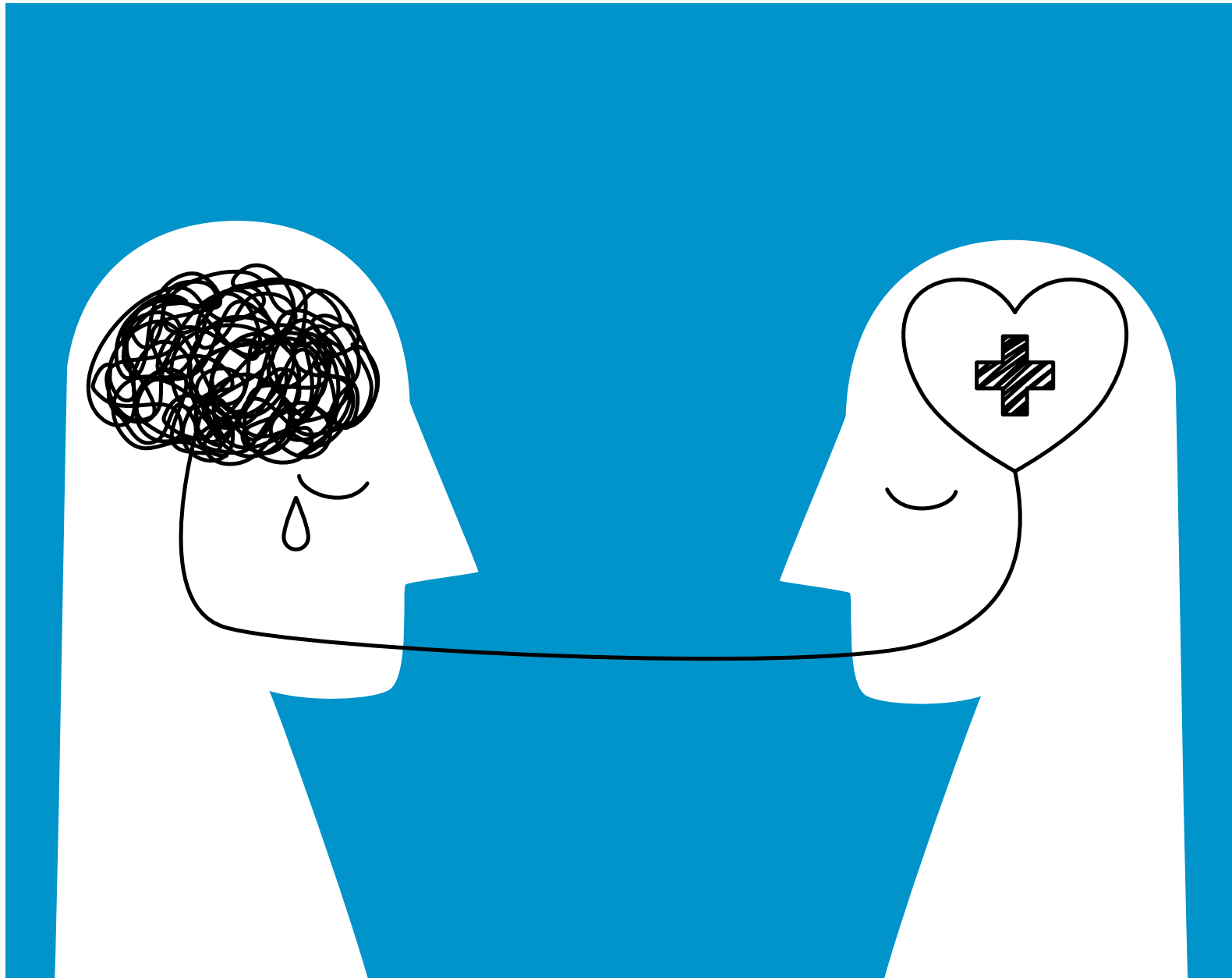


*PHILANTHROPY
AT WORK:
A NETWORK
OF SUPPORT
FOR YOUNG
ADULTS*

The Washington Early Recognition Center is the only free clinic in Missouri that provides comprehensive specialty care to patients aged 13-25 who are at high risk for developing a psychotic disorder.



Written by Gail Appleson
Illustration courtesy of Shutterstock
Photo courtesy of Dr. Daniel Mamah



Dr. Daniel Mamah, associate professor of psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

Students go off to college with the greatest of dreams. They're excited to begin this next chapter, thrilled by their new adventure and the promising road ahead. But some of these young adults are slowly changing. Their grades fall, they become more and more anxious, depressed, and paranoid. They stop going to class, break off friendships, and have trouble thinking clearly.

The cause can be early psychosis, which affects the ability of the brain to process information. While symptoms may start to develop in the early teen years, typically a psychotic break—when someone loses touch with reality—happens when they are 18-21 years of age.

"You're growing up. You think the world is your oyster. You have your whole life ahead of you and now it seems to have stopped. Now your reality is that everything seems impossible," says Daniel Mamah, MD, MPE, founder and director of the Washington Early Recognition Center (WERC) that helps psychotic adolescents and young adults. Dr. Mamah, an associate professor of psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, says the situation can affect the entire family.

"Imagine you're a mother or father and all of a sudden you are seeing this happening and there's nothing you can do to control it. It's heartbreaking," he says. "So, we work with families and patients, spending as much time as needed to help them get their lives back on track."

WERC, which operates through the Department of Psychiatry at Washington University, is unique because it's the only clinic in Missouri that provides comprehensive specialty care to patients aged 13-25 who are at high risk for developing a psychotic disorder or who are in the initial years of a diagnosed psychotic disorder such as schizophrenia or psychotic bipolar disorder.

The clinic is also very unusual because there is no charge for its wide range of services. These include psychiatry, individual and group psychotherapy, case management, community outreach, cognitive training and elaborate behavioral and cognitive assessments.

Thanks to generous donors, The Foundation for Barnes-Jewish Hospital is a proud supporter of WERC.

PHILANTHROPY IS CRUCIAL

"Pretty much all of our funding is through philanthropy. Philanthropy is why we're able to provide free services and why we can optimize care," Dr. Mamah says. "Philanthropy is what allows us to not be so pressed for time. We can do what we need to do for how long it takes."

WERC, which opened in January 2020, has treated more than 100 patients so far. Its goal is to accurately identify young people early in the course of their illness and provide interventions to reduce symptoms and improve social, educational and vocational functioning. Its staff includes licensed counselors, social workers, psychiatric physicians, a nurse practitioner and other clinicians who work collaboratively to develop a personalized treatment plan for each patient.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, psychosis is much more common among teens and young adults than many people think.

“ THAT’S WHY PHILANTHROPY IS SO CRUCIAL...TO ALLOW US TO PROVIDE THE FULL ARRAY OF SERVICES NEEDED AND LIMIT FINANCIAL OBSTACLES TO CARE. HOPEFULLY WE CAN DO THIS AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.

— Daniel Mamah, MD, MPE

In the U.S., approximately 100,000 young people experience psychosis each year, says the organization, and as many as three in 100 people will have an episode at some point in their lives.

"You'd be surprised how many families that it affects. And it doesn't respect sociodemographic lines either," Dr. Mamah says. "It doesn't matter if you are rich, poor, or whatever your race is. Everybody can be affected. Even for those with means, the illness can be devastating."

EARLY TREATMENT IS KEY

Dr. Mamah says teens and young adults are particularly vulnerable to psychosis because they are in formative periods in life when several major changes occur. During this time, for example, the brain undergoes a rearrangement of critical neural circuits.

That's why it's so important that individuals who have early psychosis or are at high risk of developing it are identified early and get treatment as soon as possible. Studies show that early treatment provides the best hope of recovery by slowing, stopping and possibly reversing the effects of psychosis as compared with treatment provided in the years after onset of the disorder.

But psychosis may be hard to detect initially. It rarely appears

suddenly and the symptoms may not seem alarming at first. Instead, an individual has gradual changes in thoughts and may not be aware this is happening. Also, symptoms can be difficult to distinguish from typical teen behavior, Dr. Mamah says.

"If their first psychotic break is at age 19 or 20, 80% to 90% of the time they have had prodromal symptoms earlier," says Dr. Mamah, explaining why the clinic takes patients as young as 13 years of age. "It could be just the beginning in the change in behavior. Something is off. It could be as simple as not doing well in school," he says.

Other symptoms can include changes in thinking or speech, suspiciousness, odd behaviors or hearing voices. Often anxiety, depression or substance abuse is also present. These symptoms can be frightening, confusing and distressing to those affected and their families.

"People are suffering with these symptoms and aren't getting treated. They don't recognize it, or they don't feel comfortable getting treated," he says. "It can be quite a convoluted process to get treated for mental illness, particularly when you're first starting out. Our clinic tries to make this process easier."

"That's why philanthropy is so crucial," he says, "to allow us to provide the full array of services needed and limit financial obstacles to care. Hopefully we can do this as long as possible." ✨



For more information about the Washington Early Recognition Center, please visit werc.wustl.edu. To learn more about the Foundation and how you can help, please contact Birgit Spears at 314-273-3635 or Birgit.Spears@bjc.org or visit FoundationBarnesJewish.org.