

Creating a Psychosis Formulation: Describing the Journey You're On

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This paper is a worksheet and a set of instructions designed to help people observe their own lives using the perspectives of my psychosis triangle and eight journeys to create a map of the path they've been on and to become the author of their own journeys. It is OK for other people to collaborate in creating their map and journey, but the job of the other collaborators is to reflect back accurately what the person on the journey is going through, not to define their journey for them. Think about the difference between a mother who notices her child is cold and responds by putting a sweater on them and a mother who puts a sweater on her child because she's cold. When someone accurately sees and hears us, we can see ourselves through their eyes, perhaps even seeing things about ourselves we hadn't noticed or thought about, but if they try to impose their view of us on us, it feels repressive and can lead us to withdraw.

Consider these four stories:

When Maria was a small child in rural Mexico she had the ability to sense who was sick in her Village. They believed that this ability was a blessing from God and encouraged her to develop it. She learned how to use some folk remedies and healing. She came to Los Angeles with her husband and son illegally when she was in her 20s. She supplemented her income as a maid by selling healing potions. After several years, her husband left her barely able to support herself and her son, and her son's behavior became worse and worse. The school became concerned and he was diagnosed with ADHD and given some Social Security income. Children's services told Maria to stop her "witchcraft business" or risk losing him. She reluctantly gave it up, but had less and less to hold on to: She was a failure as a wife, mother, and healer and she was impoverished and at risk of deportation. When she broke down in tears at her son's school, they sent her to see me. She admitted that she was hearing negative, critical voices that she couldn't handle and agreed to take medication for both her depression and the voices. I carefully dosed her Abilify to quiet the voices, but not take away her sensitivity to others that she still considered a blessing from God. I told her that she still had a good mother inside of her that she needed to trust and encourage. She began to rebuild.

Doug grew up in an upper-middle class family in South Carolina with very conservative, traditional values. Nonetheless, his father paid for him to go to an expensive, private liberal arts college where he increasingly questioned and rebelled against the values he'd felt restricted by. He also experimented with drugs. One night at a party, he tried LSD and felt he was "opened up to the true spiritual nature of the universe". He also had the best sex of his life. Somehow that led to him running naked around the campus yelling for the girl to marry him. The campus security took him to the psychiatric hospital where, surprisingly, it took 2 weeks and antipsychotic medication to clear up, but even then, his world view was forever altered. When his father found out he'd been using drugs and "wasting his money", he cut him off. Doug took off for California to broaden his world. He discovered even more drugs, including speed, and ended up arrested for breaking into and disrupting a Yoga class saying he was Paul McCartney

and singing loudly. When I met him, he insisted he wanted to continue to expand his consciousness with drugs and he was done with his father's limited world. He refused medications. He didn't hold a job and continued to be repeatedly jailed for disruptive behavior.

R.J. emerged from a violent, fragmented, frequently incarcerated family in the black ghetto of South Central Los Angeles as both a high school drop-out and a successful rap musician who had a recording contract and even toured in Asia. Hanging out with his family, he had several incidents where he was accosted by police and even beaten by them and he ended up in jail repeatedly as a result. He became more and more paranoid of the police and started smoking Marijuana daily. When tens of thousands of dollars of recording equipment was stolen, he suspected a police plot and frightened his girlfriend by leaving his apartment and hiding from the police in various rundown hotels. He couldn't really describe how he got to jail the next time, but while he was there he was "incoherent" and forced to take antipsychotic medications which calmed him down and made him more cooperative, but also dulled his thinking and made it impossible for him to compose lyrics. His public defender got him conditionally released to live with his girlfriend and enrolled in the Village program. Over the next few months, with his girlfriend's support, he stayed away from marijuana and the police, and gradually tapered off his medications. For about a year his paranoia did not return and he began working regularly as a musician again. As the pressure mounted, however, he returned to marijuana and again became more and more paranoid. He absolutely refused to believe he was mentally ill or should get back on his medication. Instead, he focused his anger on his mother who he said hadn't protected him from his stepfather's sexual abuse and his cousin who had been arrested for murder when they were kids together. His threatening and hatred filled messages to his mother were nearly incoherent including accusing her of having a life of rape and murder and serving Satan. His girlfriend became more and more desperate as she tried to keep from losing him forever.

And lastly, Carol could always see spirits of dead people as a child and had amazing intuition to the point of seeming to be able to read minds. This wasn't surprising in her family because her aunt and grandmother had the same traits. With their support, she went to medical school. Instead of pursuing a normal medical career, she became an intuitive healer, including leading workshops and writing books. As she's explored her own consciousness further, she's become involved in women's alchemy and personal transformation. She believes that her spirit came to Earth from another planet and that she's here, in this crucial moment in history, to help humankind to take the next step in our spiritual evolution. She's happily married with a family and has numerous loyal followers.

Which of these people are psychotic?

Do they have different types of psychosis? (Or maybe we should say different journeys with psychosis and other extraordinary experiences?)

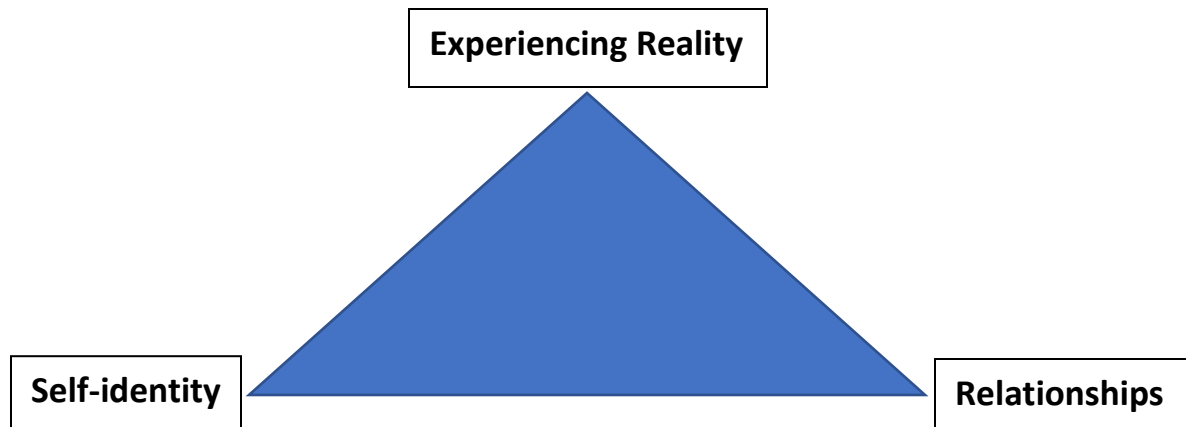
Should we try to help them in different ways?

Our current psychiatric bible, DSM 5 did away with all of the subtypes of schizophrenia, as unreliable, and created one lumping definition:

- 1) Persistence of two of five symptoms for a month:
 - delusions,
 - hallucinations,
 - disorganized speech,
 - disorganized behavior or catatonia, and
 - negative symptoms.
- 2) Reduction in functioning
- 3) Continuous signs of disturbance for at least 6 months, can include mild or subthreshold periods of prodromal symptoms and residual symptoms
- 4) Schizoaffective disorder and depressive or bipolar disorder with psychotic features have been ruled out
- 5) The disturbance is not attributable to the physiologic effects of a substance (eg, a drug of abuse or a medication) or another medical condition

Not only doesn't that help differentiate between those four people, it defines all of them as having schizophrenia, except maybe the successful physician, because she is functioning so well, though that's more likely due to her family and its resources than her mental state. This diagnostic approach is prone to over including lots of people who don't have schizophrenia, and not just a few unusual, spiritual, intuitive healers. For example, if someone is deaf, hears buzzing in their ears and can't talk clearly, and is withdrawn and lonely as a result, they'd meet the criteria for schizophrenia even though they "obviously" don't have it.

The overarching problem, in my view, is that this definition is unidimensional – it only evaluates people on the basis of their symptoms and how damaging they are – and it presumes these symptoms to be entirely biologically determined. I think their "symptoms" have to be put into some context – a context of how they view themselves, their relationships, their community, and their culture. Doing that shouldn't just be an after-thought – "let's be culturally competent in our assessments" – it should be imbedded in the way we assess and treat everyone with psychosis and other extraordinary experiences. Instead of conceptualizing psychosis as either something you have or something you are, I'm urging conceptualizing it as something that emerges (and resolves) as a product of multiple alterations in function acting in combination, no one of which produces psychosis on its own. Let's start with a genuinely "biopsychosocial" psychosis triangle:



Step 1: Assess yourself in all three dimensions.

Experiencing reality: Are you having a lot of conflict or suffering dealing with reality around you? (Note: For this step it doesn't matter whether other people are experiencing reality differently than you are. For example, it doesn't matter if you are being spied on and followed everywhere you go or if you're paranoid and imagining being spied on and followed; either way it's a serious problem.) Are you having disturbing experiences? For example, are you hearing voices, feeling like you're going to die because of germs everywhere around you, or obsessing about the end of the world?

Self-Identity: How is your self-image? (Note: For this dimension, it's your view of yourself that matters, not someone else's. There may be serious differences in both directions – you may feel more confident about yourself than others feel about you or others may see strengths in you that you don't see. These differences will likely impact your relationships, but this dimension is about self-identity.) Do you have a clear idea of who you are? How about more serious self-evaluation: how's your self-confidence? What roles are you in and how do they fit you? What are your gifts and wounds? What meaning does your life have? Do you have a sense of how you're growing and changing over the course of your life?

Relationships: How are your relationships? (Note: Include both good and bad relationships, close and less close relationships. If you're being bullied and excluded at work by your coworkers, stalked by your ex, loved and supported by your spouse and your sister, and belittled and humiliated by your parents and kids – or any combination life has happened to throw at you – include them all. Even include people you feel connected to like an ex you're stalking or a celebrity you're obsessed with even if other people tell you it's not a "real" relationship.) Do you feel pressured or supported? Are you giving or receiving? Are you moving towards people or away from them?

Which dimension(s) are weaknesses / deficits for you? Which dimension(s) are strengths? Check the boxes.

Fill out the table below:

	Experiencing reality	Self-identity	Relationships
Step 1: Assessment			
Descriptions			
Weaknesses / deficits			
Strengths			

Step 2: Are you currently in crisis or at high risk?

Think about each of the three dimensions again. Currently is something happening, either inside you or around you that's changing in a bad way? Are you going through something challenging? Are you scared of something? Are you at risk of something bad happening or falling apart? Are you in crisis? What's the cause of the crisis? Do you need help and support now different from what you've been getting?

Fill out the next section of the table:

	Experiencing reality	Self-identity	Relationships
Step 1: Assessment			
Descriptions			
Weaknesses / deficits			
Strengths			
Step 2: Current situation			
Risks / crisis			
Needs for help / support			

Step 3: Origins. How far back does this go? When and how did all of this start?

Are the problems you're having familiar to you or is this the first time anything like this has happened to you? When have you experienced this before? Looking back, are there situations or problems that have led into your current difficulties?

Which dimension did things go wrong in first? What happened?

Did it initially spread to other dimensions? Or perhaps, how did strengths in other dimensions stop it from spreading, containing it, or even reducing the original problems?

How does that compare to your assessment of your current situation? What's changed? What's the same? Do you have the same or different strengths and weaknesses?

Fill out the next section of the table.

	Experiencing reality	Self-identity	Relationships
Step 3: Origins			
How did it start			
Initial weaknesses / deficits			
Initial strengths			

Step 4: Which journey best describes what you’re going through? How have other journeys impacted you too?

Let’s go through all the journeys one by one. Think about how each journey has impacted you in each of the three dimensions – experiencing reality, self-identity, and relationships. Think about the past and the present. If any given journey doesn’t apply to you, or you just don’t connect with it, just skip it and leave it blank.

1. **Grief:** Have you experienced major losses and grief?
2. **Psychotic reactions:** Has there been major stressors in your life that were hard to adapt to?
3. **Difficulties making sense of the world:** Do you make sense of the world in unique ways? Does that create problems for you?
4. **Childhood trauma:** If you experienced childhood trauma, neglect, or abuse, how has that impacted you as you’ve grown and developed?
5. **Losing balance:** Which developmental level are you usually on – meeting basic needs, personal, relationship, extra-personal / spiritual? Have you gone backwards recently? Have you struggled to maintain your balance or lost your balance and fallen?
6. **Drugs and Alcohol:** If you’ve used drugs and/or alcohol, what impact have they had on you?
7. **Psychiatric Illnesses:** If you have a psychiatric illness, what impact has it had on you?
8. **Neurologic and medical conditions:** If you have a neurological and/or medical condition, what impact has it had on you?

Put a check mark and a brief description in any relevant box. (For example, childhood trauma may have effected your relationships by making you mistrustful of others, drugs and alcohol may have effected both your relationships, because you put drugs before your family, and your self-identity, because you’ve become consumed with shame and guilt, and a manic illness may affect your experience of reality because you become grandiose when you’re in a manic episode, but all the other boxes may be empty.)

	Experiencing reality	Self-identity	Relationships
Step 1: Assessment			
Current situation			
Weaknesses / deficits			
Strengths			
Step 2: Current situation			
Risks / crisis			
Needs for help / support			
Step 3: Origins			
How it started			
Initial weaknesses / deficits			
Initial strengths			
Step 4: Journeys Journeys that have impacted you			
1. Grief			
2. Psychotic reactions			
3. Difficulties making sense of the world			
4. Childhood trauma			
5. Losing balance			
6. Drugs and alcohol			
7. Psychiatric illnesses			
8. Neurologic / medical conditions			

Step 5: Finding your journey

Look at the boxes you filled out in Step 4.

Are lots of boxes filled out or just a few? Have you been on the same path throughout your life or have you travelled on more than one path? Have you moved from one path to another as your life has gone on or have you added journeys on top of each other so that by now you're experiencing problems from more than one journey at once? (For example, by this point in your life are you experiencing problems

from the impact of childhood trauma, ongoing drug usage, having a psychiatric illness, and losing your spiritual balance.)

Even if you have a complex picture, does one of the journeys feel like it fits you the most and is the core of what you've been experiencing? Do other journeys need to be included because they've had so much impact? Can you put together your core journey and the other important journeys by describing how the other journeys fed into your core journey? (For example, your core journey could have been about your difficulty finding a spiritual balance ever since you were a child, but you've been weakened by childhood trauma that made it hard to grow and develop, drugs that gave you glimpses of a higher reality that you couldn't sustain, and manic illness that exploited your spiritual desires to convinced you that you're God when you're not.)

Which of the three dimensions is the most problematic and active in your journey (for example, your spirituality might impact your self-identity because you're not sure who you are, and it impacted your relationships since people couldn't relate to your spiritual journey, but mostly it's been hard to carry on in everyday life and reality since you're consumed with spiritual thoughts and experiences. You're so busy exploring and building your spiritual powers you forget to eat or bathe, let alone holding a job and paying the rent.)

Return to the table in Step 4.

- Circle the name of the journey that fits you best, your core journey
- Circle the one cell on the grid that is the most problematic for you
- Circle other cells that have impacted you the most seriously and feed into your core journey

Step 6: Creating a personal formulation

Think about the descriptions you've written into the table. Look back at where you started. Look at your core journey, which dimension is the most problematic, and how other dimensions feed into your core journey. Look at where you're at now.

Think about how things have changed for you over time throughout your life. Can you track the changes within a journey? within a dimension? between journeys? between dimensions?

Are things starting to fit together for you? Can you see a path that describes the journey you've been on? Can you create a brief formulation of your journey and write it down on the bottom of the table?

Using your own words, what's the title of your formulation?

	Experiencing reality	Self-identity	Relationships
Step 1: Assessment			
Current situation			
Weaknesses / deficits			
Strengths			
Step 2: Current situation			
Risks / crisis			
Needs for help / support			
Step 3: Origins			
How it started			
Initial weaknesses / deficits			
Initial strengths			
Step 4: Journeys			
Journeys that have impacted you (check and brief description)			
1. Grief			
2. Psychotic reactions			
3. Difficulties making sense of the world			
4. Childhood trauma			
5. Losing balance			
6. Drugs and alcohol			
7. Psychiatric illnesses			
8. Neurologic / medical conditions			
Step 5: Core journey			
Circle Core journey, most problematic cell, and other impactful cells			
Step 6: Formulation			
Write down a short personal formulation:			
"Title" of your formulation:			

Once we've taken the step of describing the journey we've been on, we have begun the process of moving from being merely a character in our own stories, and likely the passive victim of the genes, events, and the other characters around us, to being the author of our own stories, capable of shaping for ourselves where we go next.

Now we're ready to plan together how to improve your life and not just how to treat your illness.