

Individuals who come to a primary care setting with symptoms such as disconnected, illogical thoughts or unusual auditory or visual sensations are among the most difficult people to diagnose and treat. Student health services, general physicians' offices, and other ambulatory care centers may lack the specialized staff and training to feel confident in their ability to help these people.

Such symptoms may be substance-induced, related to medical illness, or part of an adjustment to developmental changes, especially in adolescents or young adults. The early symptoms may mimic mood disorders, such as depression and anxiety disorders, but may also be a sign of a potentially serious psychotic illness. Appropriate treatment may include medications, which are effective in relieving many of the symptoms. These medications may have side effects, so it is very important that the decision to use them is based on an accurate and thorough assessment. Individuals experiencing these difficulties should therefore be thoroughly evaluated by mental health professionals trained in recognizing the early features of psychotic disorders.



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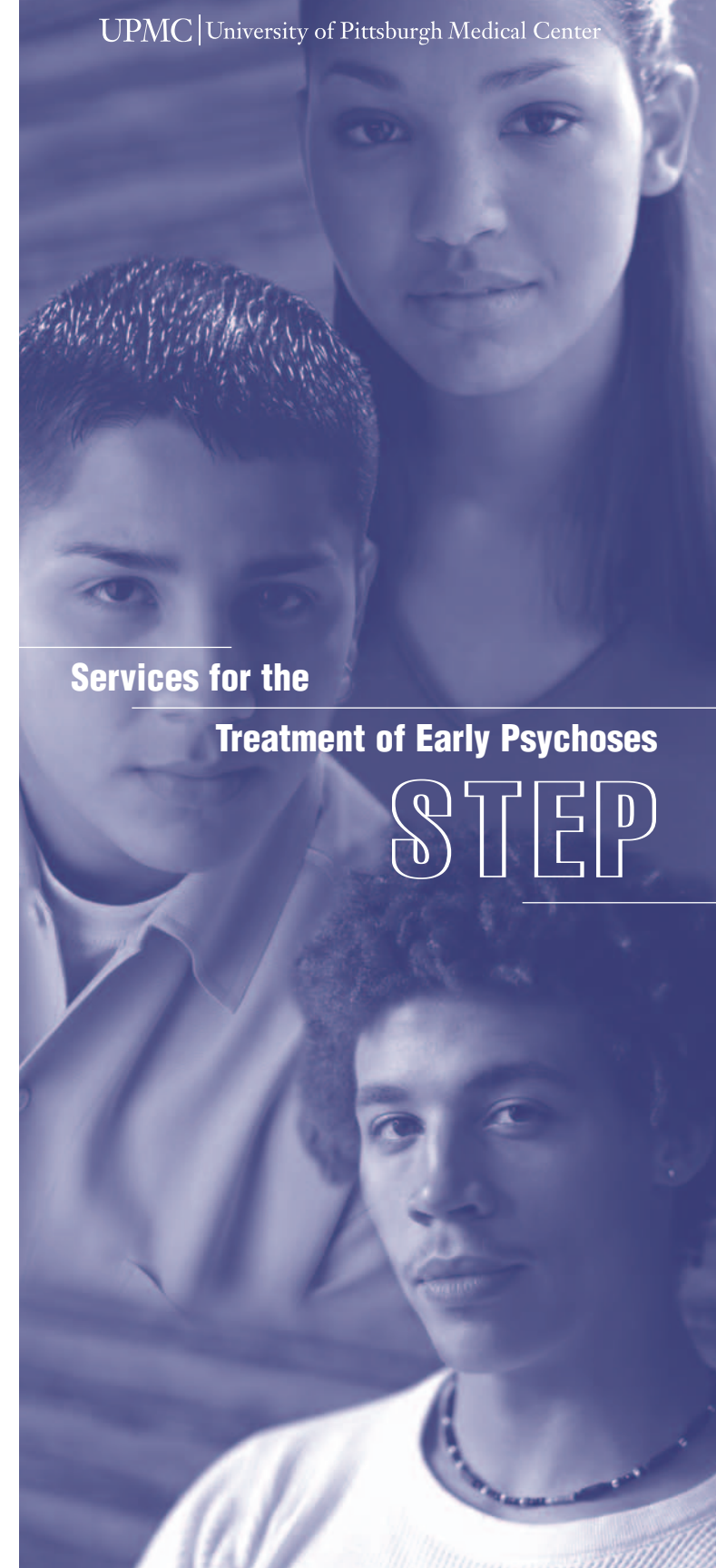
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**Services for the
Treatment of Early Psychoses**

STEP



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Services for the Treatment of Early Psychoses

STEP is a clinical program for the evaluation, treatment, and rehabilitation of people who may be experiencing early symptoms and signs of psychotic illness. The overall goal of the STEP program is to determine how early symptoms may contribute to the onset and course of psychotic disorders, in order to make better treatment decisions.

STEP is part of the Services and Research for Recovery in Serious Mental Illness (SRRSMI) of Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic (WPIC). Rehabilitation and recovery are core to the mission of SRRSMI.

Who Qualifies for this Special Program?

STEP provides evaluation and treatment services for individuals ages 12 to 50 who are having psychotic symptoms or difficulties separating reality from unreal experiences or false beliefs. Such symptoms may include:

Delusions or false beliefs. The person may believe that:

- people are talking about or trying to hurt him or her
- he or she has special powers or is “specially chosen”
- he or she is receiving messages from television or other unlikely sources
- parts of his or her body have changed (having two hearts, for example) or stopped working.

Hallucinations or other perceptions without an external source. The person hears voices, sees things that others cannot see, or experiences strange sensations on the skin or within the body.

Disorganized thoughts. The person may shift rapidly from idea to idea without a clear connection. The person’s speech may be illogical, and his or her way of speaking may be unusual. Changes in concentration and/or attention may also be present.

Social and emotional difficulties: The person may become socially withdrawn and may have a diminished expression of emotions. He or she may express emotions inappropriately — for example, smiling while describing distressing events.

What STEP Offers

The STEP treatment team offers continued therapy and follow-up care, including state-of-the-art psychotherapeutic and medical treatment, along with regular contact with a psychiatrist.

STEP utilizes WPIC’s excellent clinical facilities and makes use of the latest diagnostic technologies in an effort to understand the origins, development, treatment, and course of psychotic illnesses. Many afflicted persons return to productive, successful lives. Individuals in the STEP Program have access to several rehabilitative programs at SRRSMI, which help them achieve their learning, working, living, socializing, and health goals.

Support for STEP is provided by Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, the National Institute of Mental Health, foundations, and other private funding sources.

Research Opportunities

The STEP coordinator may determine whether people are eligible to participate in research studies focusing on the early course of psychotic disorders. Research studies may include detailed clinical assessments, physical examination, neuropsychological testing, blood studies, and brain imaging. These research assessments may be completed while the person is an inpatient at WPIC or can be done on an outpatient basis. Consent for research is obtained separately and is conducted under the rules and regulations of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pittsburgh. There is no cost involved for research procedures.

How to Make Referrals to STEP

To discuss the STEP Program or to schedule an initial evaluation, call 412-246-5432.

For more information regarding research opportunities, contact the research coordinator, at 412-586-9009.

In an emergency, refer or bring the person to the WPIC emergency department at 3811 O’Hara Street, in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, telephone 412-624-2000.