



PIER INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

What is PIER?

The Portland Identification and Early Referral Program (PIER) provides confidential assessment and early assistance for young people between the ages of 12 and 25 in the Greater Portland area who are at risk for mental illnesses. Most services provided by PIER staff are funded through research grants. Contact PIER for an initial assessment or consultation at no charge.

By getting help early, a person's chances greatly improve for staying in school, working, maintaining friendships and planning for the future. The PIER Program provides education and treatment for young people and their families, and conducts research about the effects of early identification in stemming the progression of mental illness.

How can I tell the difference between the early warning signs for psychosis and other mental health or developmental issues?

Early warning signs can appear as: laziness, forgetfulness, clinical depression or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

The "red flags" for psychosis include:

- Sensory sensitivity to light, sound and touch
- Decreased sense of smell
- Reduced concentration, attention and memory
- Difficulties understanding others and being understood in conversation
- Suspiciousness, paranoia or baseless fearfulness
- Subtle, very brief and infrequent illusions or hallucinations
- Odd ideas and behavior that are new and uncharacteristic
- Delusional thinking, but without conviction
- Progressive and marked deterioration in functioning at work or school
- Withdrawal from friends and even family members

These symptoms in isolation and for shorter lengths of time could be a response to a loss or significant change in one's life. A combination and worsening of these symptoms could preface the onset of psychosis. If a professional or parent observes some of these changes in a young person, we encourage them to contact us for an assessment.

What parts of the brain are affected in young people with prodromal psychosis?

The frontal lobes of the human brain are the area of higher order cognitive functions like judgement, planning, reasoning, organization, maintaining a focus, and initiating action. During adolescence, maturation of the frontal lobes is incomplete. It is during this stage of development that frontal lobe impairment may become evident in a young person at risk of a major mental illness. This under-activity in the frontal lobes can contribute to a clinical picture of diminishing academic performance, trouble processing new information, disorganization and apathy or a lack of mental liveliness. A corresponding over-activity of the limbic system impacts primitive emotions and feelings and creates a sensory overload experience which can trigger psychosis.

How can PIER be helpful to schools?

PIER offers a range of services to schools in the Greater Portland area and beyond, including training to school staff on understanding psychosis and recognizing the early symptoms, consultation on how to work with a child who may be at risk and information about how and when to make a referral to PIER. We are also available to present to student groups, such as health education classes or school-wide assemblies. These interactive presentations help to reduce stigma and misinformation about mental illness, as well as provide students with information about early treatment.

PIER also provides an educational toolkit for teachers who are interested in adding mental health content to their curricula. Our training and materials may be helpful for school staff to reduce stigma and support students who may be struggling with mental health concerns or symptoms.

