



The **ONLY** Time Is **NOW**!

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There are many words and phrases used to describe psychosis: weird – crazy, cuckoo, “out there”, bizarre. But it’s not incomprehensible, given a bit of knowledge about how the human brain functions and just a bit of developmental psychology.

For example, one of the weirdnesses of psychosis is a Loved One’s changed perception of “time”. **In psychosis, there is often no “before” and no “tomorrow” – only NOW.**

How can this be? How is it so?

To understand, that in psychosis, neither past nor future exists, we must turn to Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget popularized the concept of “object permanence” – an understanding that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen. Piaget observed that young infants, from birth to about age of two, lack the cognitive ability of “object permanence”. Remarkably, a common feature of psychosis is the person loses (for the duration of florid psychosis), what infants gain typically by the age of two – the cognitive sense of “object permanence”.

In psychosis, EVERYTHING, to borrow a phrase from Dr. Martin Luther King, has the “fierce urgency of now”. Via neurochemical mechanisms which researchers do not yet fully understand, a person experiencing psychosis, is often unable to form short term – and therefore – long term memories. Experiences in psychosis simply do not “imprint” in one’s memory. Therefore, there is no “yesterday”.

Similarly, because *imagining* the future is a cognitive activity – i.e. which relies on the proper functioning of our brain’s PREFRONTAL CORTEX – the future does not exist either. **The ONLY time period which exists is NOW.**

For infants before the age of two (years), their prefrontal cortex (PFC) has not developed enough to remember that an object which they just saw but is no longer in their line of sight, still exists. Similarly, their PFC has not developed sufficiently to be able to imagine the future – if for no other reason that they do not have sufficient life experience to do so.

For our Loved Ones experiencing psychosis, although their PFC has developed sufficiently to form memories and imagine the future, their PFC is not getting the needed neurochemical activation to function properly. Therefore, until the needed neurochemical activation is restored, our Loved Ones can lose “object permanence” – and with it the sense of “before” or “after”. Lacking “object

permanence” means not being able to remember what came before and not being able to predict what will be.

As it turns out, great understanding of serious mental illness and psychosis can be gained by studying and understanding Jean Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development. By examining the following table, Caregivers will be able to recognize the cognitive level of their Loved One’s thinking at any given time.

Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development

Stage	Age range	What happens at this stage?
Sensorimotor	0-2 years old	Coordination of senses with motor responses, sensory curiosity about the world. Language used for demands and cataloguing. Object permanence is developed.
Preoperational	2-7 years old	Symbolic thinking, use of proper syntax and grammar to express concepts. Imagination and intuition are strong, but complex abstract thoughts are still difficult. Conservation is developed.
Concrete Operational	7-11 years old	Concepts attached to concrete situations. Time, space, and quantity are understood and can be applied, but not as independent concepts.
Formal Operational	11 years old and older	Theoretical, hypothetical, and counterfactual thinking. Abstract logic and reasoning. Strategy and planning become possible. Concepts learned in one context can be applied to another.

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For example, many caregivers notice that their Loved One is thinking only in “concrete” (or literal) terms. This level of thinking is characteristic of children somewhere between the ages of 2 and 11.

One mistake which caregivers often make is only thinking about their Loved One in terms of their physical chronological age. What REALLY matters, however, is the level of thinking (cognition) of their Loved Ones,

rather than physical (calendar) age.

**Note: in the above chart, “conservation” in the “Preoperational” stage refers to a child’s ability to understand that certain properties of objects, such as volume, mass, or number, remain unchanged despite changes in their form or arrangement. This cognitive milestone typically develops around the age of 7. Conservation is a key concept in Piaget’s stages of cognitive development.*

- *Definition — Conservation is the understanding that properties like volume and mass remain constant despite changes in shape or appearance.*
- *Developmental Stage — Children typically grasp conservation during the concrete operational stage, around ages 7 to 11.*
- *Classic Tasks — Piaget used tasks, such as pouring liquid from one container to another, to test conservation understanding.*
- *Importance — Mastering conservation is crucial for logical thinking and problem-solving skills in children.*

While this may seem counter-intuitive for our “kids”, we commonly acknowledge possible “diminished cognitive ability” among seniors. Whether physically young or old, it’s not about physical age but rather about how well (or poorly) our neurochemistry is allowing our brain to function.

Watch for our next blog post about: Psychosis and “Magical Thinking”