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THE ROLE OF THREAT APPRAISALS AND SAFETY-SEEKING BEHAVIOURS IN DETERMINING NEED FOR CARE IN PSYCHOSIS

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Introduction: Van Os et al. (2009) have proposed a Proneness-Persistence-Impairment model to explain the psychosis continuum, and cognitive models of psychosis have suggested that appraisals of anomalous experiences may be key in determining 'need for care'.

Objectives: The present study investigated the interaction between appraisals and safety behaviours in the maintenance of impairing psychotic symptoms.

Aims: It was predicted that individuals with psychotic symptoms without a need for care would display fewer threat appraisals and safety behaviours than their clinical counterparts, and that these variables would predict distress.

Methods: The study recruited people with persistent psychotic experiences but who had no-need-for-care (Persistence group; n=39) and individuals diagnosed with a psychotic disorder who were receiving current treatment (Impairment group; n=28). The participants were assessed on semi-structured interviews of appraisals and safety behaviours in relation to their psychotic experiences and on anxiety and depression questionnaires.

Results: Both groups had similar levels of psychotic symptoms in the last month, including first rank symptoms. However there was a large significant difference between Impairment and Persistence groups in threat appraisals and safety behaviours, with the Persistence group reporting higher levels of both. A mediation analysis found that threat appraisals mediated the relationship between safety behaviours and anomaly-related distress, suggesting that threat appraisals may maintain anomaly-related distress, a defining feature of Impairment status.

Conclusions: These data provide support for the cognitive model of psychosis, with threat appraisals potentially playing a major role in the transition from non-clinical anomalous experiences to clinical psychotic status.