



MONTHLY MENTAL HEALTH NEWSLETTER

Presented by the Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office Mental Health Task Force

In this Issue: Munchausen's Syndrome



WHAT IS MUNCHAUSEN'S SYNDROME?

Munchausen's Syndrome (also known as *Factitious Disorder imposed on self*) is a mental health disorder where persons will fake, exaggerate, or induce physical, emotional or cognitive disorders. (DSM-5, 2013) Their main objective is to be seen by others as an illness stricken victim, so that people care for them and they are the center of attention. It is important to note that they are not faking illness for things like opiate pain meds due to an addiction disorder or for any financial benefit such as, making a claim to receive a disability check. They seek no material gain. The actual origins for this disorder are still debated by researchers, and no single cause has been proven. Most agree it originates in maladaptive development during the early stages of one's personality formation.

There are 4 main ways people with Munchausen's Syndrome fake or induce illnesses,

1. Lying about symptoms, for example, choosing symptoms that are difficult to disprove, such as severe headaches or pretending to have a seizure or pass out
2. Tampering with medical test results such as, adding blood to a urine sample
3. Self-infliction including, cutting or burning themselves, poisoning themselves, or eating contaminated food
4. Aggravating conditions in various ways like rubbing feces into wounds to cause an infection, or reopening healed wounds

Question: Why is it called "Munchausen's"?

Answer: Munchausen's Syndrome was named after German cavalry officer, Baron von Munchausen (1720-1797), a man known for his extensive travels and his over the top dramatic tales. The Baron's name was first used clinically in 1951 when Richard Asher described a pattern of self-abuse, where individuals fabricated histories of illness.

An Important Distinction

The difference between Munchausen's Syndrome and the highly publicized Munchausen's by Proxy Syndrome is "who" gets sick or injured. Persons presenting with Munchausen's Syndrome fake or cause themselves to be sick or injured. Munchausen's by Proxy indicates the same seeking of attention and sympathy, but the mission is achieved by causing injury or illness to others. These "Proxys" are usually their own child or a relative that trust them with their care. In some Proxy cases the Proxy dies from the illness or injury caused by the caregiver/parent who then receives the sought after attention and sympathy.

Prognosis Is Often Poor

People living with this syndrome, actively seek treatment for many disorders, but are unwilling to admit to and seek treatment for this syndrome. Their prognosis is poor due to their lying, sabotaging of medical tests or harming themselves to get symptoms. For those who want to change, long-term intense psychotherapy and in some cases medication is the best course of action.

Behaviors that indicate Munchausen's Syndrome may be present

- Making frequent visits to different hospitals in different areas
- Claiming to have a history of complex and serious medical conditions without supporting evidence and they will often claim they've spent a long time out of the country to account for missing medical records
- Having symptoms that do not match test results
- Having symptoms that get worse for no reason
- Often demonstrating extensive medical knowledge
- When in the hospital they may not have visitors. People with Munchausen's Syndrome often live solitary lives and have little contact with friends or family.
- Being willing to undergo often painful or dangerous tests and procedures.
- Often reporting symptoms that are vague and inconsistent, or reporting a pattern of symptoms that are actually just "textbook examples"
- Behaviors may also include extreme tales of heroism

REFERENCES

The G.C.S.O. Mental Health Tasks Force encourages you to utilize the sources listed below and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) at www.samhsa.gov to learn more about this and other important mental health topics.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/factitious-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20356028>

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5. American Psychiatric Association. Washington D.C. 2013

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