Munchausen syndrome
Munchausen syndrome is a mental disorder in which the patient fakes illness to gain attention and sympathy. This can result in doctors providing unnecessary treatment, including surgery. Munchausen syndrome is difficult to diagnose because many other conditions need to be ruled out first. It is also hard to diagnose because people with the condition tend to see many different doctors, so their pattern of behaviour is hard to detect. Treatment aims to manage rather than cure the condition, and is rarely successful.

Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MBP) is the old term for a form of abuse where a person either fakes or produces symptoms in someone else, usually their child. This is now called ‘fabricated or induced illness by carers’ (FIIC) and is different to Munchausen syndrome.

Munchausen syndrome (also known as factitious disorder) is a rare type of mental disorder in which a person fakes illness. The person may lie about symptoms, make themselves appear sick, or make themselves purposely unwell. This type of mental disorder is most often seen in young adults and is considered a type of self-harm.

A person with Munchausen syndrome can be very convincing, which can result in doctors providing unnecessary treatment, such as medication or surgery. A person with Munchausen syndrome doesn’t pretend to be ill for personal gain, such as prescription medications or money. Instead, the person is driven to behave the way they do for complex psychological reasons, including a strong desire for attention and sympathy.

Often people with Munchausen syndrome have experienced childhood trauma.

Symptoms of Munchausen syndrome

A person with Munchausen syndrome gains intense satisfaction from the attention associated with playing the ill patient or victim. Signs and symptoms that may suggest Munchausen syndrome include:

- a spectacular medical history that includes a large number of tests, medical procedures and operations
- an odd collection of seemingly unrelated symptoms
- a lack of conclusive results despite intensive medical investigations
- new symptoms that appear after medical tests prove negative
- extensive medical knowledge of many different illnesses
- frequenting many different doctors, sometimes in other states or territories
- frequent presentation at emergency departments, usually at different hospitals
- requests for invasive medical procedures or surgeries
- failure to improve despite medical treatment, including relapsing for unknown reasons.

Common presentations of Munchausen syndrome

A person with Munchausen syndrome may convince doctors in many ways. For example, they may:

- pretend to be in pain
- exaggerate symptoms
- fake symptoms, including psychological symptoms
- poison themselves with chemicals
- infect themselves with unclean substances
- tamper with diagnostic tests – for example, contaminate a urine sample with sugar or blood
- interfere with a medical condition so that recovery isn’t possible – for example, repeatedly open or contaminate a skin wound or not take prescribed medication
- ignore a genuine medical problem until it becomes serious.

Common complications of Munchausen syndrome

A person with Munchausen syndrome is at risk of many complications including:

- side effects from prescription medicines, including overdose
- complications from poisoning or self-harm practices
- complications from medical procedures or surgeries
- death from self-harm or complications of medical intervention.

Risk factors for Munchausen syndrome

Some people may have a higher risk of developing Munchausen syndrome than others. Risk factors may include:

- chronic illness during childhood – the person may have received a lot of attention because of their illness
• chronic illness of a significant family member when the person was a child
• self-esteem or identity problems
• relationship problems
• difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy
• ability to lie and manipulate
• a history of mental problems such as depression, hallucinations or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
• the need to blame personal failures on external factors, such as illness.

**Diagnosis of Munchausen syndrome**

Diagnosis is difficult because a range of legitimate physical and mental illnesses must be ruled out first. To complicate matters further, a person with Munchausen syndrome tends to seek help from various health care providers to avoid "tipping off" any one doctor. Diagnosis, if it happens at all, may depend on abstract concepts such as:

• The person’s symptoms don’t make sense when compared with the test results.
• The person is unusually eager to undergo invasive medical procedures and operations.
• The person doesn’t respond to treatments in a predictable fashion.
• Other people in the patient’s life don’t confirm the person’s symptoms.

**Treatment of Munchausen syndrome**

Treatment aims to manage rather than cure the condition, but is rarely successful. Recovery tends to be slow or non-existent. Treatment options may include:

• Medications to treat associated mental disorders such as depression or anxiety. Unfortunately, a person with Munchausen syndrome may misuse prescription drugs to provoke symptoms for further medical intervention.
• Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) may help to change the person’s beliefs and actions. However, it is unlikely that someone with Munchausen syndrome would admit to falsifying symptoms, which can make progress difficult. Some people with Munchausen syndrome flatly refuse psychiatric help.
• Avoiding unnecessary tests and surgeries is important to reduce the risk of complications. This can be aided by encouraging the person to go to only one primary care doctor. However, a person with Munchausen syndrome is likely to move on to other doctors and start again.

**Munchausen syndrome by proxy**

Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MBP) was the term previously used for a rare but serious form of abuse where a person either fakes or produces symptoms in someone else, usually their child. In Australia, MBP is now known as ‘fabricated or induced illness by carers’ (FIIC), to distinguish it from the mental disorder Munchausen syndrome. In Australia, FIIC is considered child or victim abuse, rather than a mental disorder.

In cases of FIIC, a carer may deliberately poison or harm a child to procure unnecessary tests and medical procedures.

The most common form of abuse appears to be apnoea (stopping breathing). The child may be revived by ambulance officers and taken to hospital, where all tests prove negative. Sometimes the child doesn’t survive the carer-induced apnoea.

FIIC is very rare, with estimates suggesting that between 15 and 24 cases occur in Australia every year. The mother is the perpetrator in most cases. However, this is thought to reflect the high number of women who take on the role of primary caregiver.

**Where to get help**

- **Your GP** – for information and referral
- **Community mental health service**
- **Australian Psychological Society** Tel. 1800 333 497
- **Mental Health Carers Australia** (formerly ARAFM) Tel. 1300 554 660
- **Child Protection Crisis Line** (24 hrs, 7 days a week) Tel. 13 12 78

**References**

- Factitious disorder, 2018, Mayo Clinic US.
- Factitious disorder imposed on self, 2018, The Merck Manual Online Medical Library US.
- Factitious disorder imposed on self, The Cleveland Clinic Information Centre US.

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More information

Mental illness

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Mental illness explained

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Mental illness explained

- Early signs and intervention with mental illness
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives...
- Forensic mental health
  Forensic mental health services provide assessment and treatment of people with a mental disorder and a history of criminal offending, or those who are at risk of offending...
- Let's talk about depression in men
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...
- Mental health first aid
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...
- Mental health laws and compulsory patients
  If you are a compulsory patient under the Mental Health Act, you have rights and there are people who can help you...
- Mental illness explained
  The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness...
- Mental illness treatments
  The correct treatment for mental illness can help a person’s condition to improve or help a person to live well, despite the presence of some ongoing symptoms...

Types of mental illness

- Anxiety disorders
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people...
- Bipolar disorder
  Bipolar disorder is a type of psychosis, which means the person’s perception of reality is altered. It is characterised by extreme mood swings...
- Borderline personality disorder
  People with borderline personality disorder may exhibit extreme behaviour, such as repeated self-mutilation or taking overdoses of medication...
- Depression explained
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support...
- Dissociation and dissociative disorders
  Dissociation is a mental process where a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity...
- Eating disorders
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups...
- Heart disease and mental health
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...
- Munchausen syndrome
  Munchausen syndrome is a mental disorder in which the patient(fakes illness to gain attention and sympathy...
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
  Obsessive compulsive disorder can have a profound effect on a person's life...
- Panic attack
  Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be severely disabling...
• **Paranoia**
  Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are ‘out to get you’ or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others.

• **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**
  People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event.

• **Psychosis**
  In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused.

• **Schizoaffective disorder**
  Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder may be difficult because the symptoms are similar to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

• **Schizophrenia**
  People with schizophrenia do not have ‘split personalities’ and they are not intellectually disabled.

• **Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis**
  Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem.

**Eating disorders**

• **Anorexia nervosa**
  A common misconception is that anorexia nervosa only affects young women, but it affects males and females of all ages.

• **Binge eating disorder**
  You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment.

• **Bulimia nervosa**
  Understanding the warning signs of bulimia nervosa and seeking help as soon as possible will help your recovery.

• **Eating disorders**
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups.

• **Eating disorders and adolescents**
  Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what’s happening in their life.

• **Eating disorders - support for families**
  You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder.

• **Other specified feeding or eating disorders (OSFED)**
  OSFED is now one of the most common eating disorders.

**Support, services and treatment**

• **Antipsychotic medications**
  Antipsychotic medications don’t cure mental illnesses, but they can reduce, or even eliminate, symptoms.

• **Cognitive behaviour therapy**
  Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving.

• **Counsellors**
  Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor.

• **Early signs and intervention with mental illness**
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives.

• **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)**
  ECT can be an effective treatment for some types of mental illness.

• **Mental health care plans**
  A mental health care plan explains the support provided by each member of a person's healthcare team.

• **Mental health first aid**

We all see friends and loved ones going through tough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

- **Mental health problems - early care helps**
  
  If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early...

- **Mental health services - case managers**
  
  A case manager looks after your interests while you are a client of public (government) mental health services...

- **Psychoanalysis**
  
  Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past...

**Living with mental illness**

- **10 tips for living with depression**
  
  Try to do some activity every day ... 10 tips for living with depression...

- **10 tips to improve your mental fitness**
  
  The brain is like a muscle -- if you don't give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical...

- **About mental health services in Victoria (video)**
  
  Victorian mental health services provide expert advice and support for people of all ages...

- **Alzheimer's disease - Early signs (video)**
  
  Family and friends of people with Alzheimer's disease discuss their experiences and how to recognise the early signs...

- **Eating disorders and adolescents**
  
  Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life...

- **Eating disorders - support for families**
  
  You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder...

- **Heart disease and mental health**
  
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

- **Let's talk about depression in men**
  
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

- **Mental health first aid**
  
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

- **Mental illness and violence**
  
  People with a mental illness who are receiving effective treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community...

- **Mental illness - family and friends**
  
  You can do a lot to help your friend or relative with a mental illness, but you need to look after yourself too...

- **Strong relationships, strong health**
  
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

**Suicide prevention**

- **Early signs and intervention with mental illness**
  
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives...

- **Mental health first aid**
  
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...
Suicide

In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death for males and females aged between 15 and 44. We can all play a role in preventing suicide by looking out for possible warning signs, reaching out...

Suicide and mental illness

A suicide attempt may be an early warning sign that a person is developing a mental illness...

Suicide - family and friends

The grief felt by family and friends can be deeper when the cause of death is suicide...

Youth suicide - the warning signs

All suicide threats are serious. You don't have to be a trained professional to help a person contemplating suicide...

Related Information

Paranoia

Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are ‘out to get you’ or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others...

Schizoaffective disorder

Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder may be difficult because the symptoms are similar to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia...

Psychosis

In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused...

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event...

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)

People with body dysmorphic disorder constantly worry about the way they look...

Home

Related information on other websites

- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- PsychNet-UK
- The Cleveland Clinic Information Centre US

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