

Somatoform Disorders

SOMATIC SYMPTOM DISORDER
CONVERSION DISORDER
FACTITIOUS DISORDER/MUNCHAUSEN SYNDROME

Somatoform Disorders

- *Somatic* comes from a Greek word for “body”
- Symptoms take a bodily form without apparent physical causes



What is Somatic Symptom disorder (SSD)?

- Somatic Symptom disorder involves **being distressed by concerns involving physical symptoms for which a physical cause cannot be found.**
- Sometimes described as *hypochondriacs*, people with this disorder **experience symptoms of physical illness**, such as headaches or stomach pain, **but medical exams reveal nothing physically wrong with their bodies.**



There must be something wrong with me!

- You may believe the sensation indicates a serious illness like **stomach cancer**, although you have no evidence from a doctor to substantiate that concern.
- Distressing thoughts and frequent doctor visits often **make you think the worst about your symptoms** and you continue to search for an explanation, even when other serious conditions have been ruled out.



Is it all just in my head?

- Somatic symptoms are, quite literally, all in the mind.
- You suffer because you *believe* you are sick
- We all occasionally have these feelings, but not to the extent of someone with this disorder
- *Pretending* to be sick to avoid responsibility or to gain attention does not qualify as somatic symptom disorder



Symptoms of SSD

- **Pain** is the most common symptom, but whatever your symptoms, **you have excessive thoughts, feelings or behaviors related to those symptoms**, which cause significant problems, make it difficult to function and sometimes can be disabling.



Symptoms

- Having a **high level of worry** about potential illness
- Thinking **normal physical** sensations are a **sign of severe physical illness**
- Real, but minor symptoms, are **blown out of proportion**



- Feeling that medical evaluation and treatment have not been adequate
- Fearing that physical activity may cause damage to your body
- Repeatedly checking your body for abnormalities
- Frequent health care visits that don't relieve your concerns or that make them worse



What causes Somatic Symptom Disorder?

- **Genetic and biological factors**, such as an increased sensitivity to pain
- **Personality trait of negativity**, which can impact how you identify and perceive illness and bodily symptoms
- **Problems processing emotions**, causing physical symptoms to become the focus rather than the emotional issues
- **Learned behavior** — for example, the attention or other benefits gained from having an illness

What puts someone at risk of developing SSD?

- Having anxiety or depression
- Having a medical condition or recovering from one
- Having a strong family history of a disease (cancer, etc.)
- Experiencing stressful life events, or past trauma or violence
- Having a lower level of education and socio-economic status



Negative Effects

- Problems with relationships, school or work
- Financial problems due to excessive health care visits



How do you treat Somatic Symptom Disorder?



- **Therapy** can help you **examine and adapt your beliefs** and **expectations about your health** as well as **learn how to reduce preoccupation with symptoms**.
- **Antidepressant medication** can help reduce symptoms associated with **depression** and **pain** that often occur with somatic symptom disorder.

What is Conversion Disorder?

- Conversion Disorder, formerly called *hysteria*, is another type of somatoform disorder.
- It is a health problem that **starts as a mental or emotional crisis** - a scary or stressful incident of some kind - **and converts to a physical problem.**
- It takes its name from its main symptom – the change, or *conversion*, of a psychological factor (like fear or anxiety) into an *actual loss* of physical function.

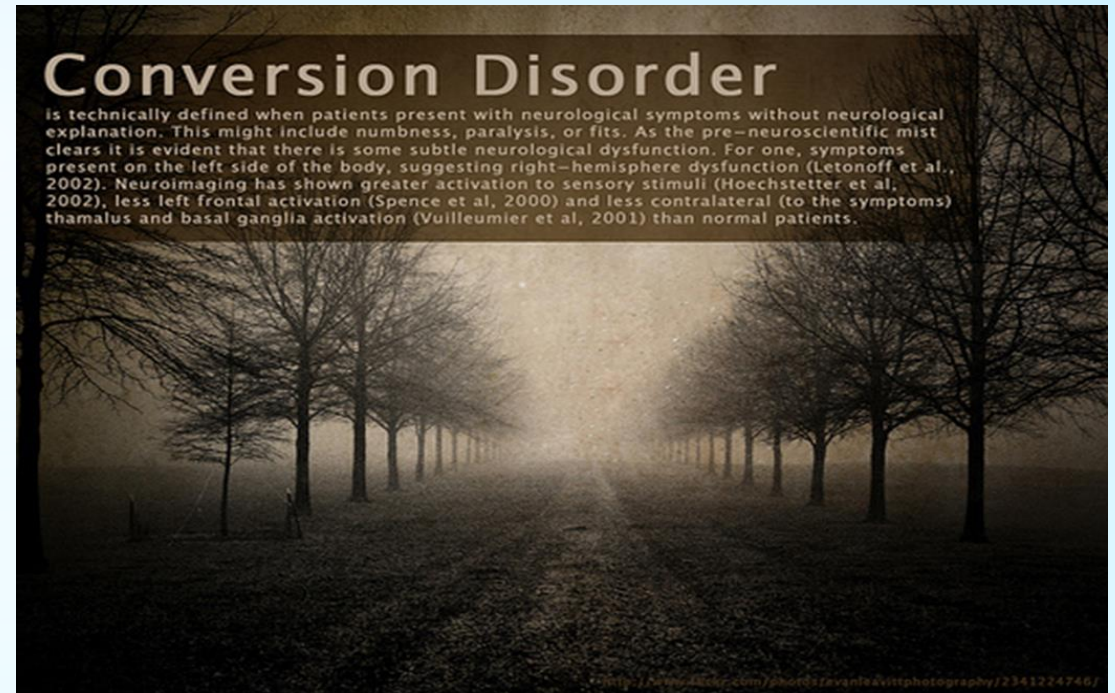


Symptoms

- A person with conversion disorder might **suddenly experience blindness, laryngitis, hearing loss, loss of sensation or numbness or even paralysis that has no physical cause.**
- Signs and symptoms of conversion disorder **typically affect your movement or your senses, such as the ability to walk, swallow, see or hear.**

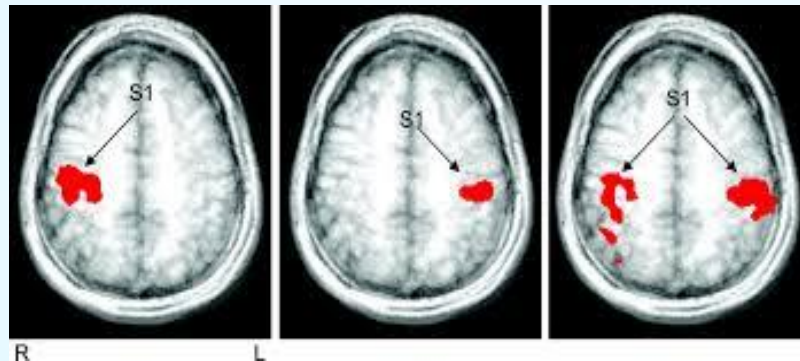


- You may have experienced a minor version of this if you've ever been so frightened that you momentarily lost the ability to move or were so stunned that you literally couldn't speak.
- Conversion disorder symptoms can **vary in severity** and may **come and go or be persistent**.



What causes Conversion Disorder?

- Episodes of conversion disorder are **nearly always triggered by a stressful event**, an emotional conflict or another mental health disorder, such as depression.
- The exact cause of conversion disorder is **unknown**, but the part of the brain that controls your muscles and senses may be involved. It may be the brain's way of reacting immediately to something that seems like a threat.



What are the risk factors?

- **Recent significant stress** or emotional trauma
- Being **female** — women are much more likely to develop conversion disorder
- Having a **mood or anxiety disorder**
- Having a **family member** with conversion disorder



Treatment for Conversion Disorder

- **Counseling (psychotherapy).** Seeing a psychologist or counselor can **help treat symptoms** of conversion disorder and **prevent it from coming back.** This can be especially helpful if you also have anxiety, depression or other mental health issues.
- **Physical therapy.** Working with a physical therapist may prevent complications of certain symptoms of conversion disorder. For example, regular movement of arms or legs may ward off muscle tightness and weakness if you have paralysis or loss of mobility.

What is Factitious Disorder?

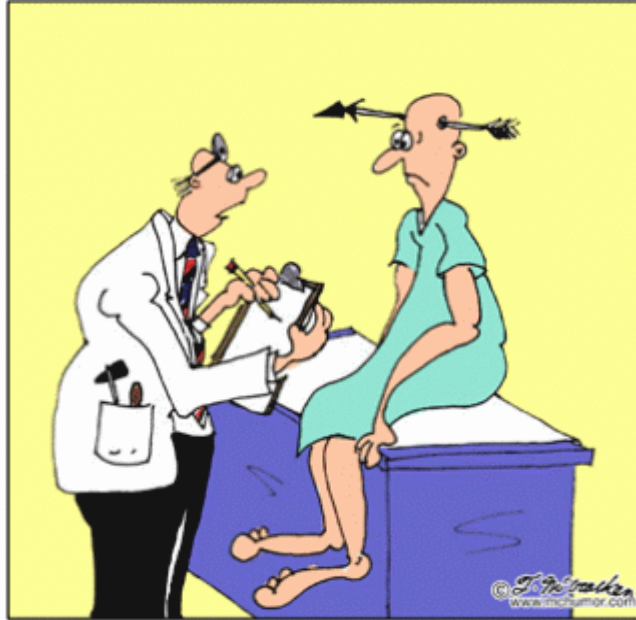
- Factitious disorder is a serious mental disorder in which someone deceives others by appearing sick, by purposely getting sick, or by self-injury.



Munchausen Syndrome



- Factitious disorder symptoms can range **from mild** (slight exaggeration of symptoms) **to severe** (previously called Munchausen Syndrome).
- The person may **make up symptoms** or even **tamper with medical tests to convince others that treatment**, such as high-risk surgery, **is needed**.



"Off hand, I'd say you're suffering from an arrow through your head, but just to play it safe, I'm ordering a bunch of tests."

Not for financial gain

- A factitious disorder is **not the same as inventing medical problems to get out of work or to win a lawsuit.**
- Although people with factitious disorder know they are causing their symptoms or illness, they may not understand the reasons for their behavior.

Symptoms

- Factitious disorder symptoms involve **mimicking or producing illness or injury.**
- People go to **great lengths to avoid discovery of their deception**, so it may be **difficult to realize** that their symptoms are actually part of a serious mental disorder.



- Clever and convincing medical problems
- Frequent hospitalizations
- Vague or inconsistent symptoms
- Conditions that get worse for no apparent reason
- Conditions that don't respond as expected to standard therapies
- Eagerness to have frequent testing or risky operations



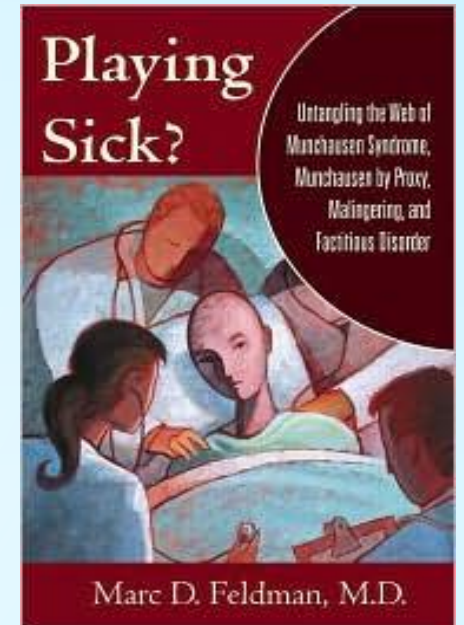
- Extensive knowledge of medical terms and diseases
- Seeking treatment from many different doctors or hospitals, which may include using a fake name
- Having few visitors when hospitalized
- Reluctance to allow health professionals to talk to family or friends or to other health care providers
- Arguing with hospital staff
- Frequent requests for pain relievers or other medications



How those with factitious disorder fake illness

Because people with factitious disorder **become experts at faking symptoms and diseases** or inflicting real injuries upon themselves, it may be **hard for medical professionals and loved ones to know if illnesses are real or not.**

People with factitious disorder make up symptoms or cause illness in several ways, such as:



- **Exaggerating existing symptoms.** Even when an actual medical condition exists, they may exaggerate symptoms to appear sicker than is true.
- **Making up histories.** They may give loved ones or doctors a false medical history, such as claiming to have had cancer or AIDS. Or they may falsify medical records to indicate an illness.
- **Faking symptoms.** They may fake symptoms, such as stomach pain, seizures or passing out.



- **Causing self-harm.** They may make themselves sick, for example, by injecting themselves with bacteria, milk, gasoline or feces. They may injure, cut or burn themselves. They may take medications, such as blood thinners to mimic diseases. They may also interfere with wound healing, such as reopening or infecting cuts.
- **Tampering.** They may manipulate medical instruments to skew results, such as heating up thermometers. Or they may tamper with lab tests, such as contaminating their urine samples with blood or other substances.



Munchausen syndrome by proxy

- Factitious disorder imposed on another (previously called Munchausen syndrome by proxy) is **when someone makes another person sick, requiring medical attention**. Usually this involves a **parent harming a child**. This form of **child abuse** can put a child in serious danger of injury or unnecessary medical care.



What causes factitious disorder?

- The cause of factitious disorder is **unknown**. However, people with this disorder **may have experienced a severe illness when they were young** or **may have been emotionally or physically abused**.



Who is at risk of developing Factitious Disorder?

- Childhood trauma, such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse
- A serious illness during childhood
- A relative with a serious illness
- A poor sense of identity or self-esteem
- Loss of a loved one through death, illness or abandonment early in life
- Unfulfilled desire to be a doctor or other health professional
- Work in the health care field
- Personality disorders

How common is this disorder?

- Factitious disorder is **considered rare**, but it's **not known how many** people have the disorder. Some people use fake names to avoid detection, some visit many different hospitals and doctors, and some are never found out - all of which make it difficult to make a reliable estimate.



Why is it so hard to treat?

- Factitious disorder is **mysterious and hard to treat**. However, without treatment, serious injury and even death can result.
- People with factitious disorder **may be well aware of the risk of injury or even death** as a result of self-harm or the treatment they seek. Still, they are **unable to control their compulsive behavior and are unlikely to seek help**. Even when confronted with proof - such as a videotape - that they're causing their illness, they often **deny it** and refuse psychiatric help.



Is Treatment even possible?

- Because people with factitious disorder **want to be in the sick role**, they're **often unwilling to seek treatment** for the disorder. However, **if approached in a gentle, non-judgmental way**, a person with factitious disorder may agree to be treated by a mental health provider.



Careful how you approach



- **Direct accusations** of factitious disorder may make the **affected person angry and defensive**, causing him or her to walk away from treatment.
- So the therapist may try to **create an "out"** that spares your **loved one the humiliation of admitting to faking symptoms**. A therapist may instead suggest that stress is responsible for some physical complaints.

Sources

- [MayoClinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org)
- [PsychCentral.com](https://www.psychcentral.com)
- *Thinking About Psychology* 2nd Edit.