

11 Bizarre Medical Conditions

There are medical names for conditions of people who:

- 1) Swear that their family members are impostors*
- 2) Will go hungry rather than lose their cell phone*
- 3) Have hands that act of their own volition*
- 4) Dream while awake after eating fish*
- 5) Laugh when they hurt themselves*
- 6) Are blind but swear they can see*
- 7) View molehills as mountains*
- 8) Are convinced they are dead*
- 9) Make jokes compulsively*
- 10) Panic seeing a button*
- 11) Have no fingerprint*

• *Yakov M. Wagschal*

1. No Laughing Matter

Diagnosis: Pain asymbolia

Symptom: Sufferer responds to pain with laughter

Imagine a person who laughs when he hurts himself. Believe it or not, there are such people, and medicine has even given the condition a name—pain asymbolia.

We know that everything *Hashem* created in His world ultimately serves a positive purpose. Even pain. It serves as a warning to avoid repeating the action that triggered that pain. If people did not feel pain when they burned themselves, for example, there would be little to discourage them from exposing themselves to injury or even death by fire.

Indeed, there are actually people who are afflicted with insensitivity to pain. A small percentage of children, as little as one in a million, are born with this rare condition. Some of these children have even been known to watch their body's natural reactions to burns or other bruises, suffering broken bones, bad burns and other serious wounds. One child was blinded when he damaged his own eyes without realizing it. Others have died as a result of this condition.

People who are insensitive to pain lack the body's natural warning signal of danger. It's not that they don't feel what is happening. It's just that it doesn't bother them. They must be trained to react to certain sensations by withdrawing from that activity.

People afflicted with pain asymbolia sense the pain. They just don't suffer from it. They can differentiate between the pain of a cut, burn, scrape or hard knock. The only difference is that they do not find it unpleasant. Some even react to pain with a reflexive smile or outright laughter.

Doctors explain this by pointing out that one part of the brain produces the sensation of pain while another part is responsible for associating this sensation with unpleasantness. However, given that forensic explanation, the doctors are mystified why the two are not associated in a person with pain asymbolia.

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There is also even a rarer medical condition that works in the exact reverse way: A person experiences extreme discomfort but feels no pain. Such a person may accidentally cut his finger, feel tremendous discomfort, but not be able to tell where the pain is coming from without a visual or other cue. All he knows is that something is making him uncomfortable.

Pain researchers contend that even among people whose senses are all functioning normally there are variations in the way they experience pain. Some can put up with severe pain for prolonged periods while others cannot. Remember that the next time you meet your friend who runs to the doctor for every minor discomfort. Chances are they are experiencing pain on a different level than others do.

2. It's No Joke

Diagnosis: *Witzelsucht*

Symptom: Patients recite bad jokes compulsively

If you ever run into somebody who can't stop the bad jokes, don't jump to conclusions. It may be an uncontrollable impulse caused by the brain. Doctors know this condition by its German name *witzelsucht*, meaning seeking or addicted to jokes.

If you hear someone say, "What did

one snowman say to the other? It smells of carrots," you've probably met a real-live case of *witzelsucht*. Such people will go on proclaiming such inane wisecracks all day. Some who suffer from *witzelsucht* will even habitually say jokes that are completely inappropriate.

Scientists say that *witzelsucht* is caused by damage to a specific part of the brain. It may come as the result of a stroke or accident, tumor or infection. The personality of an individual is controlled by the right hemisphere of the brain. Any change to that region of the brain can dramatically alter a person's behavior, such as his mood, interests or sense of taste.

Some who suffer damage to the right side of their brain become euphoric. It was recently reported that a man who suffered a stroke became incapable of experiencing sadness. This man began laughing all the time, regardless of his setting. It is worth noting that people who suffer damage to their brain's left hemisphere will sometimes display an opposite condition. They become chronically angry and depressed.

Now, don't start banging the right side of your head against a wall in the hope of achieving perpetual happiness. Many of those who suffer from *witzelsucht* find it unbearable. One 56-year-old man lost all of his friends because he talked too much and his endless stream of bad and inappropriate jokes annoyed everyone. Doctors were forced to incarcerate him in order to



68-year-old Malcolm Myatt of England laughs uncontrollably and recites jokes all day since his stroke in 2004.

try experimental treatments in the hope of curing his condition. His behavior was consistent with a study done by Taiwanese researchers who showed that some *witzelsucht* patients do not understand their own or other people's jokes.

There is no direct treatment or cure for *witzelsucht*. Doctors concentrate on treating the damage to the brain that triggered the condition. They may also prescribe mood-altering drugs. Some patients receive therapy to train them to moderate their behavior.

3. Permanent Residence in Lilliput

Diagnosis: Alice in Wonderland Syndrome

Symptom: Objects are perceived as much smaller or larger than their true size

There are no clear statistics on how many people suffer from this. Those who do, though, must deal with a very unique condition known as micropsia. They see items much smaller than their actual size. For instance, they may think a china closet is small enough to fit into a shoebox.

There is also a converse condition known as macropsia, in which small objects appear to be enormous. A playhouse may be confused with a full-sized building and the sufferer may think he or she could fit inside. A corridor may appear interminably long and the floor surprisingly close.

Sometimes the issue involves misperception of distances, in which objects appear to be much further than they actually are. Another form of the condition involves the sufferer misjudging or being confused about the size of his own body parts or those of others. Nearby sounds may be confused for distant ones or the opposite may happen. Another form is distorted time perception, in which the passage of time seems unrealistically slow or fast. The patient may walk slowly yet think they are racing at top speed.

Patients suffering from this