

Charles Bonnet

Charles Bonnet (1720 - 1793) was a renowned Swiss naturalist, biologist and philosopher. He is credited with being the first person to scientifically study visual hallucinations. Charles Bonnet first observed his grandfather, Charles Lullin, an intelligent and articulate man who, as his vision failed, was able to describe in great detail the visual hallucinations. Later in life Charles Bonnet himself experienced similar symptoms as his eyesight failed and again these observations were recorded.

Charles Bonnet Syndrome

Charles Bonnet Syndrome is the term now used to describe complex visual hallucinations, often pleasant in nature, which are observed by perfectly rational people and do not represent a manifestation of any mental disorder. Patients with Charles Bonnet Syndrome often don't report the symptoms for fear they will be considered crazy or insane. Patients are perfectly aware the visual hallucinations are not real. This differentiates hallucinations from delusions. Delusions are part of a mental disorder where the patient actually believes what they see is real.

Triggers and Duration

Vision loss in one or both eyes due to any eye disease can trigger these visual hallucinations. The most common trigger is 'Age Related Macular Degeneration', but it has been described with many eye disease presentations. Charles Bonnet Syndrome is more frequent in patients with higher degrees of visual impairment and when both eyes are affected, rather than just one. The hallucinations can begin gradually and increase in frequency, however usually onset is quite sudden. While not unpleasant it is good to know the frequency normally reduces with time, even without further changes in vision levels. It has been suggested fatigue, stress, dim or bright lights can also trigger episodes in some patients.

Types of Phantom Images

These visual hallucinations take two general forms.

Unformed Visual Hallucinations

These are the most common form of hallucinations and originate from the eye itself. Because the light sensitive cells of the retina are not functioning properly they may send misguided impulses to the brain. Coloured or colourless bright lights such as points, flashes, sparks, spots or streaks. Also alterations in the persons perception of colour can be reported.

Complex Or Formed Hallucinations

These images are far more complex. Most often people are seen, possibly strangers, but also people known to the patient, sometimes from years previously - even images of the patient at a younger age. Other objects can also be seen such as birds, cars or buildings. It is believed these complex images involve vision within the brain (the visual cortex). It is suggested because the visual cortex is no longer receiving incoming visual impulses from the eye it 'releases' images, possibly relating to the person's past experiences and memory.

Management

Compassionate reassurance and counselling of both the patient and their family and carers. Once the patient understands the images do not represent a more disturbing mental disorder, the hallucinations do not usually bother them any more.

Ensuring patients are mentally stimulated and keeping them socially involved and busy with hobbies and activities may lessen the hallucinations. This is important anyway because people who have lost vision can be depressed and may take time to come to terms with the disability.