

## Busted Nerves

A 49-year-old housewife, Norma Jean Luby, was seen in a central Appalachian clinic on referral from her primary care physician for evaluation for depression. She was a pale, neatly and plainly dressed woman, with hair combed straight back and no makeup. Her eyes were filled with tears during most of the interview, although she did not weep openly. She spoke slowly and so softly that at times she was inaudible. She appeared timid, abject, dependent, helpless, and hopeless, claiming she had been ill all of her life, and summed up her situation by stating, "My nerves are busted. I can't do anything."

There were multiple complaints of pain, including "black ankles," painful "knots" in her neck, "busted discs" in her back, headaches that radiated all over her body, and pelvic and abdominal pain. She described a variety of gastrointestinal and respiratory complaints. It became apparent upon conducting a routine review by systems that she would respond positively to every query. She said she had been depressed all her life, and it was getting worse. She was sad, helpless, hopeless, and fearful. She had no energy and did little but "sit around the house." She had no interest in anything, and nothing gave her pleasure. She was able to fall asleep, but would awaken repeatedly during the night and be awake for good before daylight. She had no appetite and had lost 10 pounds over the preceding 2 months. She had had many episodes of weight loss and gain in the past. She said she was inattentive and disinterested. "People are talking to me and I forget what they are saying right in the middle of things." From time to time she heard voices calling her name. She would look about, but no one was present. Frequent episodes of "smothering" occurred. At these times he felt that she might choke to death. She would become dizzy, her heart would pound, and her hands would tingle.

Ms. Luby had never had a formal psychiatric evaluation or treatment; however, detailed observations made by her physician in her chart 25 years earlier revealed a picture similar in almost every respect to her current presentation. She has taken multiple minor tranquilizers over the years, with no benefit. Aside from mild, self-limited episodes of physical illness, usually infections, results of physical exams and laboratory studies have always been within normal limits, as they were at the time of this referral.

The patient was born and lived all of her life in the central Appalachian mountains. She attended school through the eighth grade, but "could not learn." She was unable to say how old she was when she stopped going to school and "stayed at home" with her mother and father. All of her siblings left home, but she "stayed home and helped her mother." This was the state of affairs until she met and married her husband, at age 23. They have three grown daughters. Her husband, a former coal miner, is drawing disability pay because of black lung disease.