

FOGGY STUDENT

A 20-year-old male college student sought psychiatric consultation because he was worried that he might be going insane. For the past 2 years he had experienced increasingly frequent episodes of feeling "outside" himself. These episodes were accompanied by a sense of deadness in his body. In addition, during these periods he was uncertain of his balance and frequently stumbled into furniture; this was more apt to occur in public, especially if he was somewhat anxious. During these episodes he felt a lack of easy, natural control of his body and his thoughts seemed "foggy" as well, in a way that reminded him of having received intravenous anesthetic agents for an appendectomy some 5 years previously.

The patient's subjective sense of lack of control was especially troublesome, and he would fight it by shaking his head and saying "stop" to himself. This would momentarily clear his mind and restore his sense of autonomy, but only temporarily, as the feelings of deadness and of being outside himself would return. Gradually, over a period of several hours, the unpleasant experiences would fade. The patient was anxious, however, about their return, as he found them increasing in both frequency and duration.

At the time the patient came for treatment, he was experiencing these

symptoms about twice a week, and each incident lasted from 3 to 4 hours. On several occasions the episodes had occurred while he was driving his car and was alone; worried that he might have an accident, he had stopped driving unless someone accompanied him. Increasingly he had begun to discuss this problem with his girlfriend; eventually she had become less affectionate toward him, complaining that he had lost his sense of humor and was totally self-preoccupied. She threatened to break off with him unless he changed, and she began to date other men.

The patient's college grades remained unimpaired; they had, in fact, improved over the past 6 months, as he was spending more time studying than had previously been the case. Although discouraged by his symptoms, he slept well at night, had noted no change in appetite, and had experienced no impairment in concentration. He was neither fatigued nor physically "edgy" because of his worry.

Because a cousin had been hospitalized for many years with severe mental illness, the patient had begun to wonder if a similar fate might befall him, and sought direct reassurance on the matter.