

Catherine the Catatonic

I was assigned to write a case study on Catherine, a catatonic, schizophrenic patient, during my six-week psychiatric rotation on the women's unit of the Missouri State Psychiatric Hospital. I was fortunate to care for her because her case was an uncommon form of schizophrenia. Catherine was also a thin anorexic. Catatonics are often anorexic because they won't eat.

She spent most of her time sitting rigidly in the same position, rarely moving. If Catherine responded verbally, she uttered only very soft, monotone replies. Since I couldn't obtain much information from her, it was quite challenging writing a case study on her.

I sat by her side day after day attempting to converse with her. A very blank stare looked back at me through hollow eyes. "Hello, is anyone home?" I thought. No matter what I asked her, all I got was one or two-word responses, at best. So, my case study was unusually short.

Getting her to take a shower required me to lead her by the hand to the shower room. I would then assist her in bathing and dressing. If I turned my back on her, she would slip out of the shower and head for her room. Since her steps were slow and stiff, she wasn't hard to catch.

When I couldn't find her on the unit, I knew to look in her room, where she would often be in the fetal position with a blanket over her head or staring at the wall. Catatonics are rarely observed today because they usually respond well to medication or electroconvulsive treatment (ECT).

Some patients are believed to exhibit catatonic symptoms because of trauma in their past or unsuccessful attempts to change extreme behavior with a lobotomy or ECT. A dramatic example of behavior before and after a lobotomy was portrayed by Jack Nicholson in the movie, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." Lobotomies are no longer performed, but ECT is still practiced today, but in a much milder form. It is also used for a broader range of disorders, like depression.

I was pleased to witness Catharine discharged from the hospital with her husband and family before my rotation ended. But, it's common that patients like Catherine will likely return several times for further treatment.

(The names in this story are fictional)