

Psychiatric comorbidities in patients with mass social media-induced illness presenting with Tourette-like behavior

Fremer C¹, Szejko N^{2,3}, Pisarenko A¹, Haas M¹, Laudenbach L¹, Claudia Wegener⁴,
Müller-Vahl K¹

¹Clinic of Psychiatry, Socialpsychiatry and Psychotherapy, Hannover Medical School,
Germany

²Department of Neurology, Medical University of Warsaw, Poland

³Department of Bioethics, Medical University of Warsaw, Poland

⁴Department of Audiovisual Media Studies, Filmuniversity Babelsberg, Germany

Background:

For the past 3 years we are faced with an outbreak of a new type of mass sociogenic illness (MSI) presenting with functional Tourette-like behaviors (FTB). Remarkably, symptoms spread solely via social media, while so far it was believed that for an outbreak of MSI *personal* contact among affected individuals is needed. We identified the protagonist of the German YouTube channel “Gewitter im Kopf” (English: “Thunderstorm in the brain”) who acts as the *virtual* index person of this outbreak in Germany, since patients presenting in our specialized outpatient clinic showed similar or even identical symptoms. Meanwhile, FTB became a global phenomenon presumably spread via numerous influencers on several social media channels including YouTube and TikTok. Here, we present a detailed clinical characterization of psychiatric comorbidities in patients with mass social media-induced illness (MSMI) presenting with FTB.

Methods:

Based on a thorough neuropsychiatric examination, standardized assessments, and a newly developed semi-structured interview, we collected data of 32 patients with regard to FTB, psychopathology, and diagnostic criteria for Tourette syndrome (TS) as well as use of social media.

Results and Conclusions:

Of 32 patients (mean/median age: 20.1/18 years, range: 11-53 years, n=16 females) with MSMI-FTB, 94% suffered from further psychiatric symptoms most common abnormalities in social behavior (81%) followed by obsessive-compulsive behavior (OCB) (47%), anxiety (41%), and depression (31%). Furthermore, 47% of patients had experienced bullying, and 75% suffered from coexisting somatic diseases. Remarkably, more than half of patients (53%) also suffered from TS. Even when disregarding MSMI-FTB, 41% of patients were considered as severely mentally ill, 13% as severely physically ill, and 25% as both. Exceptional high numbers of complex motor symptoms but even more vocal symptoms were observed with a remarkably high overlap with symptoms shown by the host of the YouTube channel “Gewitter im Kopf”.

After having patients diagnosed with MSMI-FTB – with or without “comorbid” TS – based on our data it is important to explore all individuals not only with respect to further psychiatric symptoms, but also for somatic diseases and experience of bullying, since these factors seem to be predisposing factors for MSMI-FTB and thus should also be addressed in psychotherapy.