

What role do anxiety and fear play in catatonia?

Jonathan Rogers:

The role of anxiety and fear in catatonia has been something we've been a bit slow to recognize actually, and it's not something that's specific to humans. The flight, fight, or freeze response are standard responses to overwhelming emotional, environmental triggers. And among a wide range of animals, there's something called tonic immobility, where prey animals will freeze. It's not exclusively prey animals, but largely prey animals will freeze when confronted with a predator they can't overcome.

How does that relate to catatonia? I've studied the subjective experience of patients with catatonia and asked people afterwards, "How does catatonia feel?" And they fell into two distinct categories with a little bit of overlap. The first describe this overwhelming anxiety or fear even saying, "I was petrified, I was so terrified I couldn't move." It's embedded in the English language, "petrified"—literally turned to stone. So that's the first group.

The second group of patients with catatonia had some explanation for the catatonia, which made sense within its own terms. So for example, "The Queen of Heaven has told me that the world will end if I move." Now, if you believe that, actually, catatonia is a sensible thing to do. Or, "My head has been cut off, if I move it will fall off." Or, "I can see a snake. I don't want to move or it will see me."

So it seems there are two different subjective experiences of catatonia. There's the overwhelming anxiety, and then there's the rational explanation within a psychotic belief framework.