

What role do you think anxiety may play in catatonia?

Dr. Beach:

If we think about catatonia from a psychiatric standpoint, the big three that we always talk about are bipolar disorder, mania, unipolar depression, and schizophrenia, in terms of causes of catatonia. But there are a lot of other things that have been associated with catatonia, and one of those is certainly anxiety. I think this gets back to the idea of catatonia as a fear response, but patients who have anxiety or anxiety disorders when they're put in fearful situations, they may develop catatonia or catatonic features as a response to that.

The place where I see this most commonly is actually in patients with autism spectrum disorder. So they have a significant vulnerability to catatonia. Studies suggest that up to 20 percent of patients with autism spectrum disorder may develop an episode of catatonia as adolescents or adults. So they're already vulnerable. And if you then introduce a source of anxiety or a source of fear, they may become catatonic relatively acutely.

I'll never forget a young woman adolescent who was brought into our emergency room who had been volunteering in the aquarium and asked to hold a large python as part of her volunteering. And she became catatonic in that setting. She had a history of autism spectrum disorder, and that sort of fear response was enough to tip her over the edge. We gave her some lorazepam, she looked wonderful after that, and we were able to discharge her without admitting her. But I think that's an example of the kind of fear response that can be present.