

What role does anxiety play in catatonia?

Dr. Caroff:

The anxiety story goes a long way back, as you probably know. People who've had catatonia, sometimes when they've been questioned about it after they recover, say that it was a frightening experience. They had a lot of anxiety, and there does seem to be a connection between intense fear or anxiety and catatonia.

What's fascinating about it from a research perspective is it's related to animal models of catatonia. Catatonic-like behaviors, which are sometimes called tonic immobility or behavioral arrest, occur in a wide range of animal species, and that's very much related to anxiety and fear. When animals are faced with a threat, one of the behaviors that they can use to ward off the threat is to become catatonic and often predatory animals will not be interested and move on to something else. So there again, catatonia even in animal models, but certainly in people, does seem to be somehow related to stress and anxiety and fear in the brain, and we don't quite understand it, but it's a definite connection.