

# How can we help psychiatrists make an accurate diagnosis when they aren't confident about diagnosing the excited form of catatonia?

## Dr. McCall:

It's true that diagnosing excited catatonia is somewhat more difficult because there's so many other things that it looks like it could be. For example, especially in older people, or maybe younger people, someone who's in a state of delirium, and let's just say they've managed to get their electrolytes all out of whack in their blood. And this causes changes in the brain. So someone becomes disoriented and going in and out of consciousness, and maybe they're belligerent. Next thing, they're hitting the nurses and now they're in restraints. And you think, this is clearly just a delirium from a medical condition. Or if it's an older person who's, say, 70, you might think this is just derivative of their underlying dementia condition and so forth.

But the things that ought to give you pause and consider a catatonic excitement — one would be very simple. That is, they've got a well-established history of some primary psychiatric disorder — especially bipolar or some other sort of mood disorder should give you pause that maybe what I'm looking at is just a severe exacerbation of that underlying psychiatric condition, and not just to write it off as delirium or dementia.

The second thing and, earlier in our discussion, I'll discuss a case that I saw as a young man of a woman who, when she did speak, and it was for a big duration, it was stereotyping. She kept saying the same essentially nonsensical things over and over again. And she said, to be verbatim, "I'm a cigarette butt, I'm a piece of shit." And what, of course, what she's saying is something very self-accusatory, something very judgmental about herself, and it has a depressive flavor. It just sounds like someone in the midst of a distress from a mood disorder. She absolutely had catatonic excitement.

So if you simply listen a little bit to the exact statements the patient is making, you may get a sense that there's an underlying mood disorder behind the otherwise bizarre behavior.