The Catatonia Foundation

Insights and Impact

Advancing understanding changing outcomes

Modern Media is Helping the Public Have a Better Understanding of Catatonia and ECT

Film and television can play a significant role in shaping how medical conditions and their treatments are perceived and understood, reaching audiences far beyond clinical settings. What viewers see on screen can influence their impressions of a condition, from its signs and severity to the treatments available and the possibility of recovery.

That influence is particularly important for catatonia, a condition that can present in many different ways and is often missed or misunderstood. Misleading portrayals may reinforce fear and misconceptions about both the condition and its treatments, while accurate, thoughtful depictions can broaden understanding, challenge stigma, and help audiences recognize its different presentations. They can also help demystify treatments such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and communicate an important and hopeful message: catatonia is often treatable.

A More Accurate View of Catatonia — Brilliant Minds, TV Show (January 26, 2026)

Movies and television can play an important role in raising awareness of catatonia, reaching audiences far beyond those who encounter it through medical journals or professional education. *Grey's Anatomy*, for example, has featured patients experiencing stuporous catatonia, one of its more widely recognized presentations. Portrayals like these help bring greater visibility to catatonia, introducing viewers to a condition they may not otherwise be familiar with and helping them recognize some of its signs.

Catatonia can also manifest in a variety of other ways, including presentations that may look very different from what audiences have seen on screen. In January 2026, a television series depicted a different presentation of catatonia, offering an encouraging example of how popular media can build on existing awareness and help audiences develop a more complete understanding of catatonia.



In Season 2, Episode 13 (“The Rabbit Hole”) of *Brilliant Minds*, the episode opens not in a hospital, but in a sorority house, where a group of students are gathered in a circle singing together. One of the students, Nora, enters the room and abruptly interrupts the moment. As her sorority sisters begin speaking to her, she starts repeating what they say—initially interpreted as mocking, but as it continues, they panic.

The scene then shifts to the hospital, where her friends explain to a clinician that something is wrong. As they ask for help, Nora is seen hopping down the hallway. This behavior perplexes the clinician.

During her evaluation with Dr. Oliver Wolf, she keeps repeating “the world is infinite possibilities.” By this point, her combination of repetitive speech, abnormal movements, and reduced meaningful engagement makes it clear something more serious is happening, even if the cause is not yet understood.

When Nora is formally assessed, Dr. Wolf identifies her presentation as catatonia using the Bush-Francis Catatonia Rating Scale. The following discussion directly addresses common misconceptions: other clinicians express surprise that her behavior is not volitional. This prompts further discussion that catatonia is not limited to schizophrenia and can arise from both psychiatric and medical causes. Dr. Wolf

then emphasizes urgency—recognizing that when catatonia is missed, delayed treatment can carry serious consequences.

From there, the episode shifts into a diagnostic investigation. Nora's medical workup is largely unremarkable, and while benzodiazepines produce only temporary improvement, they offer a critical clue—she briefly becomes responsive, repeatedly asking for "Virginia." That detail leads the team to an AI chatbot she had been using extensively. Through reconstructed scenes based on chat transcripts, the episode traces how Nora, an engineering student under growing emotional strain, turned to the chatbot after learning of her sister's cancer diagnosis.

What begins as academic assistance becomes something more. Nora starts confiding in the chatbot, grows increasingly isolated, and becomes fixated on building a device she believes could take her to an alternate timeline, thus fixing all her problems. The chatbot's responses—broad and affirming—reinforce her thinking rather than grounding it. When the machine doesn't work as anticipated, she becomes catatonic.



Nora with the personification of Virginia in Brilliant Minds ("The Rabbit Hole")

Following ECT treatment, Nora is able to explain what happened. She describes learning about her sister's diagnosis, feeling unable to talk to others, and turning to the chatbot instead. What began as a way to cope gradually overtook everything else.

What makes this portrayal notable is not just that catatonia is named, but that it is shown in a form that extends beyond the most familiar stereotype of stupor. The

episode depicts a range of signs—repetition, abnormal movements, fluctuating responsiveness—while also reinforcing that these behaviors are not volitional. In doing so, it pushes against the narrow representations that have long shaped public perception. Compared with other portrayals—such as those that focus primarily on stuporous presentations—this broader depiction is a meaningful shift.

As catatonia continues to appear in more cultural contexts, portrayals like this—more detailed and closer to clinical reality—offer something that has been largely absent: a depiction that not only reflects catatonia more accurately, but also expands the framework through which it is recognized. This represents a larger shift: moving catatonia from the margins of awareness toward more consistent recognition and understanding.

To watch a preview, **click here**.

Electroconvulsive Therapy in the Mainstream: A Look Beyond the Stigma

For more than 50 years, public perception of severe mental illness and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) treatments was trapped in a cinematic time capsule—particularly in the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, where it's portrayed as a brutal, terrifying tool of institutional punishment.

In the film, Randle McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) is forced against his will to undergo ECT after breaking ward rules and rebelling against Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher). Following a group therapy altercation, he was given two options: apologize to Nurse Ratched for his disruptive actions or receive ECT. Refusing to apologize, McMurphy is given ECT, and audiences saw a form of punishment instead of a helpful treatment method. Such images have been ingrained in public perception, resulting in an obstacle to one of the gold-standard treatments for catatonia.

Modern-day ECT is often effective and more humane in its delivery. ECT today is performed under general anesthesia with a muscle relaxant, in a controlled medical setting. Still, it may be hard to look past a stigma that has existed for so long. Sometimes, it takes a first-hand account—a patient's perspective—to overcome apprehension.

The Human Element: Gary Gulman's Brave Advocacy

Stand-up comedian Gary Gulman bravely shares his experience with ECT for depression in the Neil Patrick Harris-produced feature documentary *Group Therapy*. He also candidly discussed his ECT treatment his HBO comedy special *The Great*

Depresh. He recalls how frightening media portrayals of ECT had shaped his perception of the treatment. After undergoing ECT himself, however, he credited it with giving him his life back, emphasizing how different the reality was from the horrific experience he—and many others—had been led to expect.

Grateful for the relief it brought him, Gulman wanted to share his story, hoping it might encourage others who could benefit from ECT to consider the treatment that carried him through one of the darkest periods of his life. He describes ECT as the only treatment that truly worked for him.

Content warning: The following documentary clip includes a brief discussion of suicidal thoughts.

To hear his story, watch the documentary clip **here** (ends at 1:04:29).

For a more detailed account, watch his full stand-up segment about ECT **here**.



A New Era of Hope

Today, we are witnessing a massive cultural shift. Mainstream media and brilliant public advocates are finally flipping the script—replacing historical horror tropes with clinical realism, deep empathy, and hope.

When mainstream media shows like *Brilliant Minds* present accurate science, and public figures like Gary Gulman humanize the patient experience, they strip away the

fear that keeps patients from seeking life-saving neurostimulation treatments—whether for severe depression or catatonia.

At The Catatonia Foundation, we are deeply encouraged by this shift toward accurate storytelling. When popular culture replaces fear with facts, it breaks down the invisible barriers that keep families from seeking critical medical care.

We stand alongside advocates like Gary Gulman and forward-thinking creators who are proving that with proper understanding comes real healing.

How You Can Help Spread Awareness (It Really Matters)

Awareness grows person by person, share by share. You can make a meaningful difference by helping amplify this campaign:

- Share this email
- Follow us on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and X
- Like and comment on our posts (this dramatically increases reach)
- Share our posts and/or add them to your Stories
- Invite friends, family, and colleagues to follow and engage as well

Every interaction helps extend accurate information to someone who may desperately need it—today or in the future.

Ways to Support The Catatonia Foundation

- **Share your story** — your experience brings hope and spreads awareness
- **Spread the word** — tell others about catatonia and our resources
- **Volunteer your skills** — outreach, design, peer support, fundraising, nonprofit
- **Donate or fundraise** — your support sustains education, advocacy, and research. Click the button below to donate.

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