

What is your history with catatonia?

Dr. Fink:

Catatonia was a symptom in schizophrenia. That's the way I was taught, and we had a group of patients who were labeled catatonic schizophrenia. In the 1970s, two of my students studied catatonia and reported that catatonia was just as common in depression, in mania, delirium, as it was in schizophrenia, and I became interested in that. And so when I took over the unit at Stony Brook — Stony Brook Hospital opened in 1980 — and I was put in charge of the ECT unit.

I had a series of experiments that we were interested in, and by 1985, we had had a large number of patients who had had catatonia as well as depression or mania or psychosis, and we developed a rating scale. We did a laboratory test for catatonia, and we treated a group of patients, and in 1996, we published a report on catatonia.

At that point in time, I had a rather simple idea that catatonia was a medical situation, not a psychiatric one. And that's been my work ever since.