

STENDHAL SYNDROME

Ekta M. Patel¹, Aleena Thomas²

*¹Asst.Professor, Department of Community Health Nursing, Sumandeep Nursing College,
Sumandeep Vidyapeeth Deemed to be University,
Piparia, Waghodia, Vadodara - 391760, Gujarat, India*

*²Under graduate Nursing Student, Sumandeep Nursing College,
Sumandeep Vidyapeeth Deemed to be University,
Piparia, Waghodia, Vadodara - 391760, Gujarat, India*

Corresponding Author

Ekta M. Patel,

*Assistant Professor, Department of Community Health Nursing,
Sumandeep Nursing College,
Sumandeep Vidyapeeth Deemed to be University,
Piparia, Waghodia, Vadodara - 391760, Gujarat, India
E-mail:ekta318@yahoo.com*

INTRODUCTION

Stendhal syndrome is a condition characterized by the confluence of different symptoms, both physical and mental, when in the presence of a beautiful piece of art.¹

The term was coined in 1989 by Italian psychiatrist, Graziella Magherini, in honor of the nineteenth century romantic writer Marie-Henri Beyle, widely known by his pseudonym “Stendhal” in his book Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio. Stendhal syndrome is more commonly suffered by Europeans than North Americans, Asians or Latin-Americans.²

DEFINITION

Stendhal syndrome, Stendhal's syndrome or Florence syndrome is a psychosomatic condition involving rapid heartbeat, fainting, confusion and even hallucinations, allegedly occurring when individuals become exposed to objects or phenomena of great beauty.³

CONTENT

Beauty is no other thing than a promise of happiness.

Stendhal Syndrome (SS) is a rare psychiatric condition characterized by a state of dizziness, panic, paranoia or madness caused by being exposed to artistic or historical artefacts or having witnessed too many of these artworks at the same time.⁴ Tourism has been identified as a potential cause of the emotional processes previously reported in the clinical cases of SS. Existing studies report the occurrence of similar emotional responses among tourists after visiting geographically and culturally distinct places as has been clinically manifested in a range of tourist city syndromes, discussed in detail in this paper.⁵

Stendhal's syndrome isn't one of the disorders in the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In 1989, an Italian psychiatrist at the Santa Maria Nuova hospital in Florence wrote up her observations on the 106 visitors who had been treated as emergencies and even hospitalised in her department. Most of them had been stretchered straight to the hospital from the city's art galleries and museums. Their symptoms included physical and emotional anxiety (rapid heart rate and intense dizziness, that often results in panic attacks and/or fainting), feelings of confusion and disorientation, nausea, dissociative episodes, temporary amnesia, paranoia, and—in extreme cases—hallucinations and temporary 'madness'. Precipitating factors were 'an impressionable personality, the stress of travel and the encounter with a city like Florence haunted by ghosts of the great, death and the perspective of history.'⁶

The syndrome has also been applied to other situations where individuals feel totally overwhelmed when in the presence of what they perceive to be immense beauty (such as something in the natural world like a beautiful sunset). The effects are relatively short-lived and do not seem to require medical intervention.⁷

Guerrero and his coworkers designed a survey that they applied to a number of neurologists who attended a neuro-history course, hosted by the Spanish Society of Neurology, which took place in Italy in February 2008. The survey sought to assess the presence of Stendhal syndrome symptoms during the period of the course. Forty-eight surveys were applied, in which 17% of the doctors presented with melancholy while 13% reported feelings of anxiety. 83% of the visiting

physicians acknowledged significant aesthetic pleasure, 62% showed excitement, 33% were euphoric. Ten percent reported perceptual disorders, 4% a deep sense of guilt and 6% experienced discomforting somatic symptoms.⁸

A more recent account of the Stendhal syndrome was in 2018, where a visitor to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence suffered a heart attack while admiring Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*.

ETIOLOGY

The etiology of the syndrome has been regarded overall as a product of the experience of finding oneself in a city or a building that allows the visitor to behold wondrous works of art, the greatness of the past and its historical perspective.

POSSIBLE FACTORS

Travelling is often motivated by the coming into contact with Art, history, and culture of a destination, with the expectation that it will lead a tourist to different (and at times richer) feelings and sensory experiences. This motivation underlies the nature of association between the tourist and the destination. Seneca, the Italian philosopher, once said that a tourist's gaze is a kin to a child's wonderment at seeing the unfamiliar. For tourists with psychological difficulties, such wonderment and foreignness of travel can lead to a range of symptoms like longing for possessions, fits of anger, expression of love, and a burdened mind. Other than a history of mental illness, individuals who are psychologically fragile and overtly sensitive or emotional are also susceptible to such symptomatic behavior.⁹

TREATMENT

Specific treatment for this condition, as far as the evidence shows, does not go further than preventing major injury following syncopal activity, or ruling out major associated complications or comorbidities, as well as important differential diagnoses.⁹

Arias's work showed brain activity in several regions of the brain involved in consciousness, emotion processing, social interaction and memory in Stendhal syndrome, that do not appear to be particularly morbid.¹⁰

Additionally, several triggering risk factors have been identified and will be discussed. As far as the prognosis for this condition goes, one can assume that the person inflicted by Stendhal

syndrome will experience these symptoms many times in his or her lifetime while contemplating other works of art elsewhere.¹¹

CONCLUSION

Stendhal syndrome points out a possible relationship between tourist travel and famous art-filled cities like Florence, Paris, Athens, Tokyo, Rome, and others. This is a manifestation of the link between emotion and knowledge, which lies in the deepest spaces of the mind. When the traveler beholds grand works of art, a displacement and detachment from their familiar environment takes place, which determines the onset of symptoms and their eventual treatment. Affected patients are overwhelmed by beauty and are forced to remove themselves from the experience, due to their inability to tolerate the passionate connection of art with man.

The name of Stendhal syndrome is a trademark for beauty through painful reconstruction, of utopic moments brought about by art.

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