



Effect of ataxia on mental health – Q&A

Effect of ataxia on emotions/temper

Question (asked at Ataxia UK Regional Conference, Exeter, June 2009):

What effect does ataxia have on the emotions or temper?

Answer by Alastair Wilkins:

I think the question is whether it's the ataxia directly, or whether it's the effects of the ataxia that is having these sorts of effects. The part of the brain which is involved with emotions and temper is called the limbic system and this is slightly separate [from the cerebellum]. The limbic system can be affected in some more generalized ataxic conditions, but not necessarily in the more pure ataxias, where we would see ataxia as a primary symptom. However, people who have ataxia have disabilities and it's very common that these cause problems with emotions and temper as you can imagine. So I think probably for the most part emotional problems are likely to be a secondary consequence of some of the other issues that are associated with ataxia.

Answer by Liz Harrison:

Ataxia is a symptom of what's going on inside your body and it's not a stable condition, so you don't know how you're going to be from one day to the next. Some people find they get worse all of a sudden and that can undermine your self confidence. As well as your experience of ataxia, I think your personality and how you deal with what is happening to you can affect your emotional state and temper too. Ataxia can be terribly frustrating, but if you can come to terms with what's happening to you then the emotional see-saw balances out.

In the case of my family, although my daughter has ataxia, after the diagnosis it was not actually my daughter who got cross. I was the one who spent days cutting hedges with hand shears because I was angry about her loss of function, independence and opportunity. Physical exertion is a good way of dealing with strong feelings but we all have to deal with these things in our own way.

Mood swings in ataxia resulting from brain-tumour removal

Question (asked at Ataxia UK Annual Conference, October 2008):

I would like to know if ataxia (resulting from a brain-tumour removal) has got anything to do with sudden mood swings, for example from being happy right now to being angry, or otherwise; or is it the medication that maybe has something to do with it?

Answer by Rajith de Silva:

I think the answer to your question is yes, on both counts. I think this question actually came up last year as well, when Patrick Chinnery and I were on the panel. There do seem to be connections between the cerebellum and the rest of the brain, not surprisingly, and this seems to include the control of emotions and other so-called cognitive or brain functions. So, it may not be surprising, in the context of a cerebellar injury, to find associated abnormalities of the nature

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that you've described. However, it's equally true that there may be other factors; going through an experience like the one you've gone through will inevitably have some psychological sequelae, which will take time to work through. You need to be patient and be kind on yourself because that may take time. Finally, as you rightly pointed out, some of the medications that you may be receiving even now can have these effects as well. So, really, I think you've given the major part of the answer yourself.

Low mood

Question (asked at Ataxia UK Regional Conference, Scotland, June 2008):

My son seems to be without hope at the moment and has been for a while. I imagine that most people have times like this but is this possibly related to his Friedreich's ataxia and would treatment help?

Answer by Dr Giunti:

In general, people with chronic diseases or disabilities are prone to depression or low mood or changing of mood so I don't think it is particular to Friedreich's ataxia. We heard this morning from the Towpath Trust that exercise can improve your mood dramatically, aerobic exercise. So not only is it good for your cold feet, doing exercise can boost your mood tremendously. But it can be a problem for people in wheelchairs particularly or if you can't do exercise. There are some treatments, for example there are tablets you can try. Most of all it is important to remain active and focussed, and try to set a target for the day so that you can achieve something everyday.

Also you could discuss with the GP other options for treatments. Sometimes referral to other sources such as cognitive behavioural therapy can really help. I have seen a patient really improve with this.

Answer by Dr Harrison:

From a GP's view I often tell patients that I don't have a magic wand that can wave the problems away but the thing is, like Dr Giunti says to plan each day and set targets. My daughter says that if she doesn't get outside and do something every day that is when she starts to feel down, and communication helps of course, talking to others. Computers have been a huge help here for communication.

Comment from the floor:

At the West of Scotland branch we have found that people like to have a day of pampering to make themselves feel better. We have actually got some funds to help fund people to go have a massage or therapy for some pampering. So people can apply for a treat for themselves.

Emotional instability

Question (Asked at docs Ataxia UK Regional Conference, Leeds, 2007)

*Is it common to get mood changes or **inappropriate emotions** with ataxia? For example this person has a tendency to laugh out loud, irrespective of their true feelings.*

Answer by Rajith de Silva:

Yes, this is frequently recognised and there are a variety of reasons why you might get this neurological complication. We call it emotional overflow sometimes.

The first and most obvious explanation is that there may be common neurological mechanisms undermining both the development of the ataxia and this process. For example, the degeneration that is going on may also affect other parts of the brain which may involve and/or influence emotional control. So the same disease process, if you like, is contributing to both things. The other explanation, which is a little bit more difficult for us scientists to understand, is that the cerebellum (the organ that is mainly not working properly in ataxic patients), may have a remote effect on the organ that is controlling the emotions (which is traditionally thought to be the front part of the brain). When you go to medical school you learn that discrete parts of the brain have distinct functions. But if you look at the brain in detail there are nerves connecting one part of the brain to other parts, so these interconnections could provide the explanation.

I work closely with neuropsychologists who have experience in this field and most say that it's almost invariable that you have some degree of emotional impairment, if you want to use that term, in patients with ataxia. This then brings on many questions as to how it should be managed.

Answer by Patrick Chinnery:

I think you touched on an important issue there. Emotional aspects of an illness are something that doctors often don't ask about because it is difficult to broach those issues, particularly in a short clinic appointment. But it is important to raise these with your doctor, either your local doctor or your neurologist, because these are actually things that we can help with. We can help with using non medical treatments, psychotherapy and counselling. Also, if it is a big problem, and it's not just a problem for patients, but one for their carers too, we can sometimes help with medication. So I think it's a very good place to start our questions and answer session because this actually is an area where we can actually do some good.

Mental function

Question (Asked at docs Ataxia UK Regional Conference, Leeds, 2010)

Does ataxia affect your mind in the end? (From a lady in her 70s with cerebellar ataxia.)

Answer by Peter Baxter:

Ataxia itself does not, but some of the causes can have other effects on the brain. In children we are increasingly recognizing that damage to the cerebellum can affect mental processes as well as cause ataxia.

Answer by Liz Harrison:

Ageing is likely to be the major factor affecting the mental function.

Depression and panic attacks following a heart attack

Question (Emailed to Ataxia UK)

A relative of a Friend asked about depression and panic attacks in someone with cerebellar ataxia who had recently had a heart attack.

Answer by Laura Rooke:

Panic attacks can in fact be a symptom of depression so it may all be part of the same thing. Symptoms of depression are known to be associated with almost all neurological conditions, which includes the ataxias. It is not known whether depression occurs in some people as part of the actual process of damage to the brain, or if it is (perhaps understandably) occurring because of the huge impact the condition is having on a person's life and social interactions and the everyday frustrations they may experience. Additionally, there have actually been studies done which have showed there is a higher rate of depression and associated mental symptoms in people with heart disease or who have recently suffered a heart attack. Either way, feeling down or depressed can really affect someone's quality of life and cause concern to their family. However, a heart attack is a scary event and what you are seeing as depression or panic may be a natural reaction to the stress of being in hospital and the fear this raises.

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