

Social taboos and Tourette Syndrome - Coprophenomena



Coprophenomena is the involuntary expression of socially unacceptable words or gestures. This aspect of TS only affects a small minority of people, and are frequently not a permanent symptom for those who develop it. However, the impact of coprophenomena can be very distressing and public awareness of this problem has caused Tourette syndrome to be well known and frequently mentioned in the media.

Although coprophenomena is a frequently feared possibility in the course of TS, many people with these symptoms lead happy and successful lives.

This factsheet provides information and strategies to help you manage coprophenomena in your everyday life.

Symptoms of coprophenomena

- **Coprolalia:** the uncontrollable verbal utterance of obscenities (sexual connotations) and profanities (swear words and religious connotations). This also includes 'mental coprolalia' which describes repeated thinking of obscenities and profanities. Spoken or shouted words are not always clear.
- **Coprographia:** the compulsion to write down obscenities and profanities
- **Copropraxia:** the uncontrollable performance of obscene gestures

What causes coprophenomena and what happens?

The reason why coprophenomena occurs is not known, although it may be because tics involve the parts of the brain which filter unwanted movements and inhibit our need to do or say things. During ticcing this ability to control a response is momentarily lost. Symptoms of this type appear in all cultures.

Coprolalia or copropraxia, like other tics, is likely to change over time. It may be that a gesture or word disappears for several months and then re-appears.

Who may experience coprophenomena?

- Boys are more likely than girls to experience it.
- People who have non-tic repetitive behaviours are more likely to develop coprophenomena.
- Individuals with most severe tics are more at risk of developing coprophenomena.
- It is unusual for coprophenomena to emerge after teenage years.
- Children with a high range of co-occurring difficulties are at greatest likelihood for developing coprophenomena.

Managing coprophenomena

- Habit Reversal Therapy can help to manage these types of tics and associated behaviours
- Learning to explain the behaviour to other people (e.g. employers, teachers, less familiar friends and family members) can be very helpful. Letting other people know that the tic is involuntary and that you did not actually mean what you did or said can be important. A Tourettes Action identity card can be help to explain in some situations.
- Developing the ability to disguise the words or actions can be beneficial
- Reaching out to others with coprophenomena can help, understanding how they manage their tics and continue to enjoy life is a big and important step. Come along to a Tourettes Action (TA) support group to meet people or sign up to the online forum.

Specialist health professionals such as neurologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, nurses can work with you to help control your tics. TA's list of therapists includes clinicians working in both the NHS and privately. Please email TA for a copy of the list.