

CASE REPORT

Delusional Ideas of Alien Control Induced by the Visit of an Attraction Park

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Abstract

An alien-related theme park (Mystery Park) has recently opened in Switzerland. We report on a 27-year old patient who developed a short psychotic reaction after visiting the park. As depersonalization/derealization phenomena have repeatedly been reported in OCD patients and neurobiological similarities have been described, and considering a history of OCD in our patient, the psychotic reaction is hypothesized to possibly represent an exacerbation of the OCD symptoms. In view of the highly suggestible content of the exhibition, one could worry about the influence on particularly vulnerable subjects, especially on those in search of existential answers, and those vulnerable to develop delusional ideas (German J Psychiatry 2006;9:57-59).

Keywords: aliens, brief psychotic reaction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, delusions

Received: 15.2.06

Published: 1.4.2006

Introduction

The belief in extraterrestrial life is widely held in the general population. That belief is usually not of a delusional nature, and does only seldom interfere with subjects' daily functioning. Such beliefs can be strongly suggestible, and the ability to persuade large audiences with stories about UFOs and aliens has first become obvious the day before Halloween in 1938 when Orson Welles performed his famous radio program "The War of the Worlds", an adaptation of the science fiction novel describing a Martian invasion of the earth. Many listeners tuning in late to the show were convinced the attack was real.

Since then, the existence of extraterrestrial life, which was already the focus of passionate debates before the rise of mass media, has become an even more argued issue because of the influence of the new media. It has contributed to the development of a subculture of persons believing in aliens, UFO's and in the influence that extraterrestrials could have

on the persons themselves as well as on the course of human history.

Erich von Daeniken is a well-known representative of this subculture. Von Daeniken argues, among others, that many achievements of mankind, for example to construct the Egyptian pyramids, were only possible through knowledge gained in contact with aliens. Over 60 million copies of his books on the topic have been sold worldwide. In addition, he has participated and contributed in numerous movie and TV productions. He recently opened a theme park, called Mystery Park, in Interlaken/Switzerland. The theme park is aimed to present "mysteries of the world" in seven pavilions, based on one of his theories. The mysteries originate from past civilizations and cultures.

In view of the highly suggestible content of the exhibition, one could worry about the influence on particularly vulnerable subjects, especially on those in search of existential answers, and those vulnerable to develop delusional ideas. In this context, we report on a patient who developed a Brief Psychotic Disorder after visiting Mystery Park.

Case study

Mrs. A, 27 years old, married happily since one year, got a master of psychology at the age of 23, and is currently employed as a speech therapist. Since her early childhood, she has tics like blinking and coughing. At adolescence, she increasingly developed compulsions like verifying if she had turned off the stove, if doors were closed, and obsessions and compulsions related to the hygiene of her hands. Whereas she previously never consulted a mental health professional, she tried since the age of 20 years to help herself through specific literature, both scientific and alternative or esoteric approaches.

She describes having been particularly stressed by her university studies, and since two years by her professional activities. Her husband was recently preparing for a 3-week business travel to South America. The patient was particularly worried by the expected loneliness at home, which she told would add to the social isolation she was experiencing at work. She furthermore described increasing fatigue and anxiety, which were accompanied by worsening of her obsessive-compulsive symptoms. She apparently never had hallucinations or delusions, as confirmed by her husband and her mother.

Three weeks prior to admission, the patient began her yearly holiday, which she spent at home with her husband. She reported being much more relaxed during the first two weeks. At the beginning of the third week, she made an excursion to "Mystery Park", accompanied by her husband and 4 friends. Whereas neither her husband nor her friends observed any changes of behaviour during this excursion, Mrs. A describes that during her stay at the park she increasingly felt strange, with phenomena of derealization and depersonalization, and suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of understanding the world, without being able to describe what she was understanding. She also suddenly became aware of being remote-controlled, firstly believing to be guided by aliens. After some minutes of intensive thinking, she then increasingly began to recognize all persons as being aliens. She reports not having been frightened about these experiences, as she felt, that the aliens were friendly and intended to help her.

Back home, she increasingly began to interpret diverse events as signs given to her through a secret code by the aliens, as for example the loss of her wedding ring, which she thought was intended to indicate her the presence of the aliens. She progressively began to develop obsessions about doing the right things, especially the things that aliens expected her to do. She therefore was occupied almost continuously searching for signs, which would indicate her the right behaviour.

Her husband observed for the first time a change in behaviour the day after the Mystery Park visit. She appeared more and more absent, being absorbed in her thoughts, sometimes not responding to even loud talking. She showed hyperactivity, her behaviour appearing without goals. She, however, was still able to make her daily housework, e.g. to cook. Four days after the visit, she suddenly had the inspiration that she

would be most useful to the aliens if she died and transformed herself into pure energy. As she talked about this idea to her husband, he decided to bring her to the emergency department of the Psychiatric Hospital of Lausanne.

At admission, she firstly appeared mute and catatonic, but began to answer to the explorative questions after listening for 15 minutes to the discussion between her husband and the psychiatrist physician on duty. She then reported her experiences in an often incoherent manner, with tendencies to associative thinking, appearing sometimes perplex. Affectively, she appeared detached from the content of her reports. Furthermore, the affects appeared sometimes inappropriate (e.g. smiling). She denied any type of hallucinations and illusions. She, however, reported on thought insertion, being able to criticize partly the phenomena. She had difficulties to realize the reasons of the hospitalization but she was reassured by being taken care of.

Somatic causes such as drugs were excluded by physical examination and extensive laboratory assessment. The patient was medicated with zolpidem 10mg and lorazepam 1mg for the first night of hospitalization, which put her rapidly to sleep. The next morning she described a slight hangover, appeared still dazed and reported her convictions on aliens. She then did not receive any more medication. Forty-eight hours after admission, that is the morning after the second night at hospital, she appeared more coherent, affectively well modulated, reporting to feel exhausted, and wondering what happened to her, still maintaining her convictions about aliens, but being able to criticize them. In view of the rapid improvement and for administrative reasons, the patient was transferred to a regional hospital 72 hours after hospitalization. As some of her idiosyncratic beliefs persisted and still seemed to interfere with her thinking, risperidone 2mg was introduced, and the remaining symptoms remitted within 1 week. The patient then was discharged without medication and has been symptom free since then for 4 months. Neuroimaging had been planned initially, but was given up because of the rapid remission of the psychotic symptoms.

Discussion

Ideas of alien control are often embedded in a sub cultural or a religious context, or may be symptoms of psychotic reactions or diseases. We report what we think to be the first description of a brief psychotic reaction following exposition to the description of the existence of aliens, which in this case was in the form of an attraction park.

What is striking in the present case is the derealization/depersonalization quality of the patient's state, as well as the observed and reported affective distance from the experiences, in association with a history of obsessive-compulsive symptoms. Depersonalization/derealization phenomena have repeatedly been reported in OCD-patients and neurobiological similarities have been described (Sierra & Berrios, 1998). Indeed, some of the symptoms experienced by the patient during the psychotic episode were also

of obsessive and compulsive quality, e.g. trying to do things that aliens expected her to do and being occupied almost continuously searching for signs, which would indicate her the right behaviour. Considering the history of OCD and the already present interest in esoteric topics, one could hypothesize an exacerbation of her OCD symptoms up to a psychotic level.

Whereas we diagnosed a Brief Psychotic Disorder due to the visit of the Mystery Park, some contextual factors and the course of the symptomatology show features found also in Induced Delusional Disorder (e.g. folie à deux) (Wehmeier et al., 2003), such as the patients relative social isolation and the rapid remission with psychological detachment from her induced delusions after separation from the stimulating environment and under increased psychosocial support.

Hypnotic suggestibility, memory distortion, depressive symptoms, and schizotypic features have been reported to be significant predictors of false recall and false recognition in people reporting abduction from aliens (Chequers et al., 1997; Clancy et al., 2002; Spanos et al., 1993). Besides a possible suggestibility, none of these symptoms could be found in our patient. However, also in our case, pre-existent psychiatric (i.e. obsessive-compulsive) symptoms were found.

Changes in the activity of the parietal cortex have been suggested to contribute to the experience that active movements are externally controlled in delusions of alien control (Blakemore et al., 2003; Farrer & Frith, 2002; Spence et al., 1997). On the other hand, differences in activity of the parietal area between OCD-patients and controls have been reported using the P600 component of event-related potentials (Papageorgiou & Rabavilas, 2003), positron emission tomography with 18F-fluorodeoxyglucose (Kwon et al., 2003), EEG (Tot et al., 2002), and regional cerebral blood flow by 99mTc-HMPAO single photon emission tomography (Lucey et al., 1995). Taken together, one can hypothesize a neurobiological link between the pre-existent OCD symptomatology and the delusions of alien control.

In conclusion, this case suggests that in susceptible persons the visit of an attraction park presenting alien related topics in a highly suggestive fashion could contribute to psychotic reactions. If similar cases were reported, caution could be suggested for vulnerable individuals.

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