

Charles Bonnet Syndrome (Visual Hallucinations)

It is still a largely unknown condition because although hallucinations are not unusual in the visually impaired, many people, even in the medical profession are unaware of this phenomenon. It is also true to say that many sufferers of Charles Bonnet Syndrome do not discuss their experiences with anyone believing they must be going mad.

What is Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS) is a term used to describe visual hallucinations in people with serious sight loss and can happen to anyone experiencing loss of visual stimulation.

Charles Bonnet was a Swiss philosopher who first described the condition in 1760 when his grandfather experienced hallucinations when he was blinded by cataracts.

Who does it affect?

CBS affects people with serious sight loss and although it can occur at any age, it is most usually experienced by people who have lost their sight later in life and often after a period of worsening vision. The hallucinations often diminish and stop within a year to 18 months.

What do these hallucinations look like?

Hallucinations can range from simple flashes of coloured lights to more elaborate geometrical grids through to flowers, trees, insects and people (Victorian children are

apparently quite common!) and larger visions are not unheard of too.

At best sufferers may find them amusing or a bit of a nuisance but some people experience quite frightening hallucinations.

What causes visual hallucinations?

In normal vision, the retina receives visual images, partly analyses them and sends the information to the brain for interpretation.

It is known that there are at least 30 visual areas in the brain although it is not understood what most of them are for.

In normal sighted people, visual stimulation triggers activity in these areas. However, studies of people with CBS suggest that without regular stimulation (i.e. vision), these cells 'fire at will', creating visual hallucinations. I liken it to stories of when someone has had a leg amputated but they can still feel an itch on their toe.

It has also been recognised that people are more likely to experience hallucinations during quiet periods, for example when they are sitting alone doing nothing or when lying in bed at night or first thing in the morning.

If you experience hallucinations, try blinking a few times, look away from the image and focus elsewhere, blocking it out.

Another relevant factor to be considered is that some anti-depressants may increase the incidence of Charles Bonnet Syndrome.

The important thing to remember is don't be afraid to tell your family and friends about the hallucinations you are experiencing, you are not suffering from a mental illness and you are not the only one with them. You may find it a comfort to share your experiences and hopefully even have a little joke about them!