



Beyond vision loss

Charles Bonnet Syndrome

Charles Bonnet was a Swiss naturalist who lived over 250 years ago. He began to lose his eyesight in his early thirties and started to see vivid images of people and objects he knew were not there. His Grandfather had also noticed similar symptoms when he became blind from cataracts. Around 30% of new clients to the Blind Foundation admit to the hallucinations.

What causes Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

The cause is not fully understood. The hallucinations are generally noticed by people who have lost their sight later in life due to glaucoma, macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy but can occur at any age and following any cause of vision loss. One theory is that sight stops the brain from producing its own images, when sight is lost the brain fills in the gaps with images it has stored. Another theory is that the damaged visual pathway releases defective impulses causing the hallucinations.

What are the symptoms of Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

- People who have Charles Bonnet Syndrome are aware the images are not real.
- Visual hallucinations are seen repeatedly, often on waking.
- The hallucinations can be simple patterns or complex landscapes; they may be animals or people.
- The images may work with the surroundings such as seeing cows when looking at a field or can be complete fantasy and not fit with the environment.
- The images may be still or appear to move across your vision.
- The images are generally not of threatening scenes but when first seen people are understandably frightened by them.
- With time people can even find the images enjoyable and be amused by them.
- Each hallucination may last a few minutes or a few hours.
- They often reduce in frequency within 18 months of them first appearing but can continue to be apparent 5 years on.
- There have been cases where a stressful life event can change the images to become distressing but this is unusual.

Can Charles Bonnet Syndrome be treated?

There is no cure for the hallucinations but often talking about them and learning that they are a common association with sight loss can be helpful. Knowing that they are

due to your vision loss and not a mental health issue is of course reassuring to the sufferer and their family.

Awareness of the condition is slowly improving amongst healthcare professionals.

People can be reluctant to talk about the hallucinations due to fears and misunderstanding but it is important to discuss it with your eye health care provider as the more information that can be gathered the more is learnt about the condition.

Useful further information

<http://www.rnib.org.uk/eye-health/your-guide-charles-bonnet-syndrome-cbs/charles-bonnet-syndrome>