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# The Capgras Delusion: What It Is and How to Treat It

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## **There's a Stranger in My House**

By: Betsy Britt

Capgras (kap-gra) syndrome, also known as Capgras delusion, is a little-known disease that can cause its victims a good amount of distress. It was first recognized in 1899, when a Parisian woman known as Madame M. believed that most of her children had been replaced by imposters before they died. She also believed that her husband and sole living child had been similarly replaced (Sapolsky 2016). While searching for her supposedly missing children, she abducted others that had been replaced and kept them in her basement, only to be caught when she asked for police assistance in rescuing them in 1918. The name of the disease comes from her psychiatrist, Joseph Capgras (Sapolsky 2016). Capgras syndrome (CS) is a psychological disorder in which the victim believes that at least one person emotionally close to them has been replaced by an imposter or duplicate (Health Union 2019). Some victims believe that the replacements are robots, aliens, or clones. Others believe that there are duplicates of themselves. For example, Madame M. believed she had two or three doubles who planned to steal her identity and inheritance (Kim 2018). As one can imagine, these delusions could probably cause anxiety and paranoia in the people unlucky enough to develop this disease.

Nobody is born with CS. It has been attributed to a disturbance with the facial recognition system in the brain. Brain lesions have often been associated with the disorder (Health Union 2019). Brain damage, especially to the frontal cortical region, has also been known to cause CS (Sapolsky 2016). Different mental illnesses have also been blamed (Abumrad & Krulwich 2010). A cognitive scientist named Max Coltheart and his colleagues came up with a two-part theory of delusional belief that was confirmed by several brain images. The first part is that brain damage of some sort can cause the sight of faces that would normally induce an emotional response not to. The second is that a disconnection in the brain prevents the victim from rejecting the delusional belief. Still, the precise pathophysiology of CS is unknown (Health Union 2019).

What may be the most interesting feature of this disorder is that the victims can identify their loved ones in photographs or over the phone. This has led to the conclusion that CS has a visual component (Health Union 2019). However, CS found among the blind community has caused this belief to become altered. There is speculation that a form of the disease may prevent sounds to induce an emotional response, or that it prevents such a response no matter the

modality of input (Reid et al. 1993). There seems to be less cases among the blind, however, so further study is needed.

Whatever the cause, the feeling that something is wrong is still there. “The delusion always involves the distinct feeling that the people around you have been replaced by impostors. While they may look and act just like the real person, some essence of the person is missing” (Abumrad & Krulwich 2010). Unfortunately, without a clear cause, there is no telling who will develop CS. This delusion has been found to effect 1.3% of people a year. It has been found that, in the general population, 1.8% of females and 0.9% of males fall victim to the disorder. In rare cases, the victims are children (Fader 2018). 16 to 28% of people with Lewy Body dementia, 15% of people with Alzheimer’s, and a low percentage of people with pasic Parkinson’s have CS. Victims of anxiety are thought to be 10 times more likely to develop the disease (Health Union 2019).

The disconnect caused by CS creates the risk of the victim lashing out against who they think is an imposter. This is particularly true for male victims, long-term victims, victims also suffering from concomitant paranoia, and victims who abuse substances (Health Union 2019). In 2014, two young men suffering from CS murdered their own mothers. In 2015, a Parkinson’s victim with CS became violent towards who he thought were different versions of his with. An earlier case reported a CS victim decapitating his father while under the delusion that the older man was a robot and wanting to find the batteries in his head (Kim 2018). There is little to no evidence that the ability to determine what society’s laws permit and not permit is compromised by the disorder.

Because there is no precise cause for this disease, there is no precise treatment. If CS is caught early on in some cases, then pharmaceutical intervention may help treat the symptoms (Health Union 2019). Such cases involve the victims also suffering from a mental illness. CS due to physical damage to the brain has, at time, gone away on its own. However, the rarity of the disease has hindered the chances of finding a cure for other victims (Abumrad & Krulwich 2010).

Capgras delusion can be a very dangerous affliction to the victims and those around them. Examples of this can be scene in the episode “Alienation” of the 2012 television series *Perception* and the episode “Dorado Falls” from the 2005 television series *Criminal Minds* (IMDb). It is frightening to imagine that one would have trouble recognizing their own parent,

sibling, significant other, or child. It is also heartbreaking to imagine them not recognizing you. Hopefully, a cure will be found for this rare but terrifying delusion.

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