Intermittent Explosive Disorder

Intermittent Explosive Disorder is defined by episodes of explosive rage or aggression. It can result in injuries to self or others and involve the deliberate destruction of property. Examples of the explosive behavior may include but are not limited to:

- Vicious name calling.
- Other demeaning verbal slurs.
- Destruction of property such as punching holes in walls, breaking furniture and throwing items.
- Physical violence such as:
  - Punching.
  - Slapping.
  - Choking.

The problem behavior is not continuous. The behavior occurs in episodes or “attacks”. The attacks may occur in clusters. The attacks may be separated by days, weeks or even months. Each episode usually lasts between 10 to 20 minutes. However, attacks have been know to last for hours. Many people with this disorder report the following sensations just before or during an episode:

- Tingling sensations.
- Tremors.
- Pounding heart.
- Chest tightness.
- Head pressure.
- Hearing an echo.

An episode is usually triggered when a person feels provoked. It can be getting something that is not wanted or not getting something that is wanted. Once provoked the person's explosive behavior is an extreme overreaction to the situation. Usually the person reacts within minutes or hours of becoming angered and then stops the behavior automatically. After the episode the person might:

- Blame herself/himself.
- Feel embarrassment.
- Feel remorse.
- Feel regret.

Between episodes the person may show no signs of impulsive or aggressive outbursts.

Others who witness the episode or who have received the brunt of the explosion will voice their concern or fear of these intense violent reactions. If you have this disorder, it is likely your family members, coworkers and others close to you feel they have to “walk on eggshells” around you. Their reaction is because your episodes are seen as erratic or unpredictable.

The violent behavior of this disorder is not always directed at others. If you have the disorder you are also at significant increased risk of harming yourself. This includes:

- Intentional injuries.
- Suicide attempts.

The greatest risk of self-harm occurred in those who were also addicted to drugs or had another serious mental disorder such as depression.

During an episode it is not uncommon for the person to damage property such as kicking in doors or breaking glass. At times this can also lead to unintentional self injury. For instance, a person might break a hand when punching a wall.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Many incidents of the person failing to resist aggressive impulses resulting in deliberate destruction of property or assault on another person.
- The degree of aggression expressed during the incident is completely out of proportion with the triggering event.
- The aggressive episodes are not due to other mental disorders or conditions. The aggressive episodes are not due to the effects of such substances as:
  - Alcohol.

- Cocaine.
- Marijuana.

However, people with this disorder often are substance abusers.

CAUSES

Scientists do not know the exact causes of the disorder. Certain physical and emotional factors play a role in its development.

Biological/Physical Factors

People with the disorder may have the following:

- An imbalance in the amount of serotonin or testosterone in the brain.
- Some minor irregularities in the brain as noted in irregular EEGs.

A person might inherit an imbalance or irregularity. It may be passed down from parent to child in much the same way eye color is passed down. A person might also develop it from childhood exposure to:

- Drugs or alcohol.
- Seizures.
- Head trauma.
- Brain infections or swelling.

Emotional/Psychological Factors

People with Intermittent Explosive Disorder often grow up in unstable families that experience:

- Severe frustration.
- Physical and emotional abuse.
- Life-threatening situations.
- Alcoholism.
- Violence.

They often lack role models to teach them how to control their impulses and emotions.

A person also might become explosive as a way to control or make up for feelings of insecurity or low self esteem. These feelings of inadequacy are common in people with this disorder. Individuals might also become explosive when a current situation reminds them of a frustrating or dangerous experience from childhood. At other times, individuals may have a reaction from a past trauma but be unaware that past trauma is a trigger in the present. When this happens, they report feeling like a walking time bomb. What ever the cause, explosive episodes are more likely to happen during periods of stress.

TREATMENT

Treatment for Intermittent Explosive Disorder focuses on controlling the problem and adding to the person's quality of life. The best treatment often is a combination of talk therapy, support groups, and medication.

Therapy

Talking with a therapist or counselor helps people understand and control their thoughts and behaviors. Some forms of therapy focus on underlying feelings, motivations, and thoughts. Such work may uncover feelings and reasons behind the anger or rage. This helps people develop better ways to think about and control their behavior. Other forms of therapy look directly at the thought patterns and acting out behaviors. The person is then helped to:

1. Recognize the beginning urges to explode.
2. Identify triggers.
3. Develop ways to prevent the explosions from occurring in the future.

Group support

Sometimes being in an anger management support group, martial counseling and/or family therapy is helpful. Attending a 12-step program for ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics) or AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) can

play an important role in treatment for people who had alcoholic parents or who are struggling with alcohol themselves.

Medications

Medications prescribed for Intermittent Explosive Disorder include:

- Antidepressants.
- Mood stabilizers.
- Some anticonvulsants.

Beta blockers which are usually prescribed to slow heart rate or control blood pressure may also help control explosive rages. Working closely with a doctor will help determine the best medication for any given person.

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