



When Visual Hallucinations are normal.

Vivid, silent, visual hallucinations can occur when a person has lost over 60% of sight. This loss can be caused by any one of the eye diseases, cancer of the eye, stroke, accident to the eye, diabetes, multiple sclerosis or another condition which damages the optic nerve.

It is not a mental health condition, but caused entirely by loss of sight. It does not affect everyone with low vision and, as yet, it is not possible to predict who will develop the condition. It is called Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS).

The hallucinations appear in all sorts of forms, from simple lines and dots, coloured blobs and geometrical patterns to more complex hallucinations of faces (sometimes distorted or gargoyle-like), people (real-sized, tiny, young or old) often in period costume - or whole scenes.

These hallucinations use only one of the five senses – sight. If any of the others – hearing, tasting, smelling or touching – is involved, then it is not CBS.

Professor Dominic ffytche – the world's lead researcher into CBS – explains what happens in the brain to cause the visual disturbances. *“From the moment we open our eyes, the nerve cells in the retina send a constant stream of impulses along the visual pathways, which are passed to the visual parts of the brain. If the retina is damaged, or even if you blindfold your eyes, this stream of impulses reduces. Paradoxically, the response of the brain is not to reduce but, rather, increase the cells firing – and it is this increase that causes visual hallucinations. What you hallucinate depends on where the increase is located. If it is in the brain area specialised for colour, then you hallucinate a colour; if in the brain area specialised for faces, then you see a face – and so on.”*

Certain types of medication can help but they are not suitable for everyone. Some medications taken for other conditions have visual hallucinations as side effects, so make CBS worse. Coping strategies can be useful. Details of these - including Professor ffytche's specially created eye exercise - can be found on the website – www.charlesbonnetsyndrome.uk

CBS can be alarming and distressing, but it should not be confused with a mental condition of any kind. Too often, the nature of the symptoms prevents people from confiding in family, friends or the GP.

Helpline: 020 7391 3299 (calls answered for Esme's Umbrella by the Eye Health Team at the RNIB),

Email Judith Potts on esmesumbrella@gmail.com