

STATEMENT ON COPROLALIA

Tourette syndrome (TS) is a childhood-onset, neurological, inherited movement disorder characterized by involuntary movements and sounds known as tics.

Of the millions of people living with TS each day, fewer than 15% experience one of the most sensationalized, stigmatizing, and misunderstood symptoms: coprolalia. Coprolalia is the involuntary vocalization of obscene or socially inappropriate words or phrases. These utterances are not intentional. They are uncontrollable vocal (phonic) tics.

Coprolalia is often triggered by social context. In situations where certain words would be especially inappropriate, the brain may compel the individual to impulsively blurt out precisely those words. For example, someone entering an airport might involuntarily shout “bomb” or “hijack.” In a church, blasphemous phrases may be triggered. Seeing a woman could provoke a sexual slur. Seeing a person of color could trigger a racial slur.

How is this possible?

Does it mean people with TS and coprolalia are inherently violent, sacrilegious, sexist, racist, or unstable?

Absolutely not.

Coprolalia is not a reflection of beliefs, values, character, or intent. The utterances are involuntary and neurologically driven. Research suggests they are linked to dysfunction in brain circuits involving the basal ganglia—areas responsible for regulating inhibition and behavioral control. These circuits help determine which thoughts and impulses should be suppressed in a given context. When those systems misfire, inhibition* fails.

Coprolalia can also occur in individuals with traumatic brain injury, epilepsy, stroke, dementia, and other neurological conditions.

Most people rely on intact inhibitory circuits to filter socially inappropriate impulses before they are expressed. But imagine if your brain—through faulty circuitry and disrupted neurotransmitters—forced you to vocalize the worst possible phrase in the worst possible moment, completely against your will.

How would you feel if your own brain betrayed you—causing you to say words you do not believe, do not endorse, and would never choose to say? Words that may hurt others. Words that may deeply shame you.

For many individuals with coprolalia, the emotional toll is profound.

Because of this misunderstood symptom, people living with TS have been excluded from classrooms, scouting organizations, camps, churches, theaters, public transportation, concert halls, and workplaces. They have been bullied, humiliated, physically assaulted, and even arrested—for behaviors entirely beyond their control.

As the Tourette Association of America (TAA) stated in response to the British Academy Film Awards incident:

“When Tourette syndrome involves racial slurs, it is deeply traumatic for those who hear them and that hurt cannot be minimized. It is also traumatic for those who utter them. The public discourse surrounding this moment underscores the continued need for greater awareness and understanding of Tourette syndrome. We encourage the public to approach this moment with empathy and a commitment to learning, understanding, and inclusion.”

It is important to remember that nearly 90% of people living with TS do not experience coprolalia. While they may contend with unwanted movements and sounds, they lead full, productive lives—lives defined not by their symptoms, but by their character, abilities, and contributions.

* the mind's ability to regulate what is appropriate and accepted

For more information on Tourette’s syndrome:

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