

## Culture-Bound Syndrome or Folk Illness

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### Introduction

There are some diseases that have very limited distributions around the world due to the fact that they are caused by unique combinations of environmental circumstances and cultural practices. These are generally referred to as culture-bound syndrome, culture-specific syndrome or folk illness. These are generally limited to specific societies or culture areas and are localized, folk, diagnostic categories that frame coherent meanings for certain repetitive, patterned and troubling sets of experiences and observations.

#### *Meaning of Culture*

Patterns of behavior (values, perceptions, meaning, beliefs and practices) shared by a group of people performing essential tasks of daily living.

#### *Meaning of Culture bound*

Whenever people live as part of a culture, they are to some extent imprisoned by it - with limited exposure to other cultures or ways of thought. They think that their culture is superior to all others.

#### *Definitions of culture-bound syndrome*

a. Culture-bound syndromes are a combination of psychiatric and somatic symptoms that are considered to be a recognizable disease only within a specific society or culture. There is no objective biochemical or structural alterations of body organs or functions, and the disease is not recognized in other cultures.

b. Culture-bound syndromes are defined as 'episodic and dramatic reactions specific to a particular community - locally defined as discrete patterns of behavior'.

#### *Prevalence and etiology*

Culture-bound syndrome or folk illness is very familiar in the culture. This syndrome is more common in teenagers and adults, it affects both sexes equally. This syndrome's exact cause is idiopathic, but may be due to certain ego defence mechanisms. Projection, depression and shame or guilt are also reasons for culture-bound syndrome.

#### *Some common features*

Culture-bound syndrome patients usually have some kind of acting out that attracts cultural attention, amnesia is common. The triggers of their behavior may be difficult to isolate as they are not being perceived in Western culture as stressors. Culture-bound syndromes are often seen in people having histrionic personalities, and somatic symptoms

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are often predominant. The patient's laboratory investigations reveal no biochemical or tissue abnormalities. These syndromes improve spontaneously or need sedation or antipsychotic medications. Treatment requires collaboration with traditional healers.

#### *Cultural influences on psychiatric syndromes*

- Cultural influence on the formation of a disorder (Pathogenic effect).
- Culture selecting certain coping patterns to deal with stress, like family suicide (Psychoselective effect).
- Culture promoting the frequency of occurrence (Psychofacilitating effect).
- Culture shaping folk responses to the clinical condition (Psychoreactive effect).

#### **Management**

Psycho-Pharmacological management for reducing the symptoms, psychological management like culture bound psychotherapy and collaboration with folk / traditional healer are some of the measures included under management.

#### **Conclusion**

Culture bound syndrome is a cluster of symptoms and behaviors that can be probably

related to cultural emphases and to specific stress situations which are typical of particular populations and complete lack of familiarity of the condition to people in other cultures. Therefore awareness of culture bound syndromes is very important for all the levels of health care professionals in order to make culturally appropriate diagnoses, timely management and appropriate treatment.

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Types of culture-bound syndromes seen in Asian countries are,

Name of the disease	Geographical localization	Symptoms
Running amok	Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Brunei, Singapore	Suddenly withdraws from family and friends, then bursts into a murderous rage, attacking the people around him often followed by a claim of amnesia. Comprises vague somatic symptoms of fatigue, weakness, anxiety, loss of appetite, guilt and sexual dysfunction, attributed by the patient to loss of semen in nocturnal emissions, through urine.
Dhat syndrome	India and Bangladesh	An episode of sudden and intense fear or delusion that the penis (or in the rare female cases, the vulva and nipples) will recede into the body and possibly cause death. Hypersensitivity to sudden fright, often with echopraxia, echolalia, command obedience, and dissociative or trance like behavior. The Malaysian syndrome is more frequent in young girls.
Koro	Chinese and Malaysian Populations In Southeast Asia; Assam	Similar to neurasthenia, symptoms include physical and mental fatigue, dizziness, headaches and other pains, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbance, and memory loss.
Latah	Malaysia and Indonesia	Marked anxiety or panic symptoms including dizziness, backache, fatigability, general weakness, complaints of sexual dysfunction, insomnia.
Shenjing shuairuo	Chinese	Fear and guilt about embarrassing others with one's appearance or behavior prominent in younger people.
Shenkui	Chinese	
Taijin kyofusho	Japanese	