



# ECT

Mental illness is as old as the mind itself; so are its mysteries. In a sense, we're doing things backwards when it comes to treating mental illness; creating solutions, before we fully understand the problem.

There is a comprehensive list of psychiatric medications for almost every condition. Fortunately, we don't need to know, exactly, how many of these treatments work—it's enough to know that they do.

These drugs have improved millions of lives—a fact unchanged by our partial ignorance of their therapeutic mechanisms.

Another unfortunate fact, is that medication doesn't work for everyone. Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a form of treatment which may benefit people beyond the reach of medication alone.

There is a level of controversy surrounding ECT, stemming in part from its history when the process was not as refined as it is today. There are also lingering concerns that the procedure may impair cognitive function and memory.

Popular culture has also contributed to this negative image, with ECT famously being portrayed as a tool of punishment in the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and its movie adaptation.

Fortunately, although there are

some reports that it has been abused, in the majority of cases the reality of ECT differs greatly from its portrayal in Ken Kesey's 1962 novel.

Although its roots can be traced back as early as the 16th century, modern Convulsive Therapy was pioneered as a treatment for mental illness by Hungarian neuropsychiatrist Ladislav J. Meduna in 1934.

Meduna mistakenly believed that schizophrenia and epilepsy could not coexist in a patient. By his reasoning, artificially inducing a seizure would be therapeutic for a patient with schizophrenia.

The first agents used to induce such a seizure were camphor, and then the drug metrazol. Using electricity instead of these substances was viewed as not only being cheaper and more convenient, but was also viewed as being less frightening.

Italian neuropsychiatrists Ugo Cerletti and Lucio Bini created electroconvulsive therapy in 1938. Its use became widespread during the 1940s and 1950s, and it has steadily evolved since its introduction.

Originally, the patient was sent into a seizure while fully conscious, which could result in both mental and physical trauma; fracture or dislocation of the long bones during convulsions was a rare but serious side effect of this "unmodified" treatment.

In most countries today, patients are given a muscle relaxant and short-acting anesthetic before ECT is administered—preventing

both convulsions and significant emotional distress. Some studies have found that the procedure is seen by many patients as being no worse than going to the dentist.

Electroconvulsive therapy has been proven to be an effective treatment primarily in cases of depression, and also mania and catatonia. But it is not without its detractors.

Like psychiatric medicine, ECT has also been shown to have possible side effects. Patients have been shown to experience memory disturbance and confusion upon waking after being given ECT. These feelings usually fade within half an hour, but it is common to lose memories of a short period before and after the treatment.

In some cases however, patients have reported feeling that their memory has been permanently damaged. Some also believe that their ability to process new information has been impaired.

Although there may be a degree of risk in receiving ECT, there are still many who believe that the benefits of the procedure outweigh any negative aspects.

For some people, medication simply does not work for the conditions they are experiencing; electroconvulsive therapy offers a degree of hope when other options have been exhausted.

Although science has yet to explain how ECT works, it still has the power to change lives.

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