

# Mass Hysteria Outbreak Reported in N.Y. Town: What Does It Mean?

By RYAN JASLOW  
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Why did 12 teens from the same town in upstate N.Y. all begin to experience odd symptoms at once? Doctors say it's an outbreak of mass hysteria.

Last fall, 12 teenage girls from LeRoy Junior-Senior High School - located in a town about an hour outside of Buffalo, N.Y. - began to show symptoms similar to those of Tourette's syndrome, including painful shaking and jerking their necks, Gothamist reported.

Doctors were initially baffled. The condition was so bad for at least one of the girls that she has yet to return to school. School and state officials investigated the outbreak and school building for several months, and concluded no known environmental substances or infectious agents were found that could have caused the symptoms in the teens. "We have conclusively ruled out any form of infection or communicable disease and there's no evidence of any environmental factor," Dr. Gregory Young of the New York Department of Health told MSNBC. But not all of the girls' parents were satisfied with the results, and went on the "Today" show to state their case. "Where's the proof?" Melisa Phillips, mother of one of the 17-year-olds who came forward with the condition, Thera Sanchez, asked on Today.

Sanchez, a cheerleader at the high school, took a nap one day last October then woke up with uncontrollable tics and stutters. Sanchez and another girl on the show with symptoms, 16-year-old Katie Krautwurst, said doctors told them their condition was stress-induced. "They told us it was traumatic, but I really don't think any of us had that traumatic of a life before," Krautwurst said on Today. A day after the girls' interview, Dr. Laszlo Mechtler, a neurologist at the DENT Neurologic Institute in Amherst, N.Y. who has treated several of the girls, decided to come forward to offer an explanation to quell the curious masses. Mechtler's diagnosis? The girls may have a conversion disorder - also known as mass hysteria.

Conversion disorder is a condition in which a person can experience blindness, paralysis, or other neurologic symptoms that can't be explained by another disease. The disorder often occurs because of a "psychological conflict." According to the National

Institutes of Health, symptoms of a conversion disorder are thought to resolve a conflict a person feels inside. For example, a woman who believes it's not acceptable to have angry feelings may experience numbness when she gets really mad.

Mechtler told USA Today that when a conversion disorder occurs in a large group, its known as a "mass psychogenic illness" or MPI, because it affects groups of people in the same environment, such as in a classroom or office. That means watching the girls on television won't cause others to experience similar symptoms, he said. "This is a unique situation, and it is unusual," Mechtler told USA Today. Although the disorder is psychological in its origins, the symptoms are very much real, experts warned. Dr. David G. Lichten, a clinical professor of neurology at the University at Buffalo, told Buffalo News a mass psychogenic illness is the result of the brain making the body sick, not unlike when people feel nauseous from stage fright. Will these girls ever be cured? Mechtler told Today that with treatment, "The bottom line is these teenagers will get better."

# Is Facebook causing outbreaks of mass hysteria?

By Monica Nickelsburg | September 24, 2013  
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It all started when two high school cheerleaders in Le Roy came down with a serious case of tics, stuttering, and fainting. Doctors were unable to pinpoint a physical cause for the episodes, but as the number of afflicted girls rose, the community found it increasingly difficult to believe it was all psychological. Le Roy was once a booming factory town, and many believed residual hazardous toxins were responsible.

The town came under major media scrutiny. Erin Brockovich, the environmental activist made famous by the eponymous film starring Julia Roberts, began investigating. Several of the afflicted girls appeared on the Today show and news vans lined Main Street. Many of the girls had shown signs of improvement, but once their stories came under the media microscope, their symptoms worsened.

The search for an environmental cause lasted for several months, during which more girls contracted the same strange symptoms. Eventually it was discovered that none of the areas suspected of being toxic were dangerous. Doctors and psychologists suggested that the young girls, many of whom had experienced some previous psychological or physical trauma, were suffering from conversion disorder, a condition in which emotional trauma manifests itself physically.

Susan Dominus of *The New York Times* explains:

Fainting and nonepileptic seizures are common symptoms, as are seemingly paralyzed limbs; less common, but still well represented, are certain types of tics and twitches. Recent research has confirmed some of Freud's early theorizing on the subject, finding that a history of trauma is higher in patients with conversion disorder than in other kinds of psychiatric patients. [The New York Times]

Conversion disorder, however, is a fairly common and generally short-lived condition. What's unique about Le Roy is that individual cases of conversion disorder had apparently evolved into mass psychogenic illness in an extreme case of empathy pain. And while instances of mass hysteria are nothing new, these episodes could be exacerbated by the fact that this is the most inter-connected generation in human history.

Romeo Vitelli at *Psychology Today* writes:

Although word of mouth has been implicated in previous MPI cases, the Le Roy case has demonstrated the role that mass media can play in spreading psychogenic symptoms. With increasing media coverage of the outbreak, including a high-profile investigation launched by Erin Brockovich, the symptoms grew worse despite only affecting teenaged girls. Along with the news reports suggesting that the victims in the case were "faking it", social media also played a role with recriminations and reports of new symptoms being spread by Facebook and other sources." [Psychology Today]

Salem Village, the site of one of the most infamous cases of mass hysteria in history, recently saw another epidemic. The town of witch trial fame is now called Danvers, and in January it witnessed an eerie echo of its past when half a dozen teenagers at the Essex Agricultural and Technical School developed hiccups and vocal tics. Like the Le Roy case, the Massachusetts State Health Department couldn't find any physical cause for the epidemic. While many believe MPI is responsible, state health officials continue to investigate the strange case.

Bartholomew notes that social media will only widen the reach of MPI. Technology, he tells *The Atlantic*, creates "potential for a far greater episode, unless we quickly understand how social media is acting as the primary vector or agent of spread for conversion disorder."