

Uncontrollable Belching

by Lisa Gussin, Licensed Mental Health Counselor

From my office I could hear the guttural belching sounds come from my waiting room every couple of seconds. It sounded as if someone was dry-heaving. It was already a long day, and I dreaded what I was about to have to deal with. I called the new client back, who was accompanied by his wife. The client, Ron, is a 58-year-old white male, who, as he explained through belches, has been experiencing these deep, retching burps for the past three years. He continued to explain that they are constant, but slow down a bit when he lies down. When asked if he sleeps, Ron reported that he has learned to doze off for no more than an hour at a time and his wife, Sue, stated that even when he sleeps the belching continues.

I continued with a lengthy medical history including both physical and mental health in my assessment. Ron stated that he had undergone a partial colectomy a little over three years prior to his first visit. The belching had begun soon thereafter. Immediately I thought this had to be linked to a physical health issue. However, Ron assured me that he had seen numerous gastroenterologists and neurologists, and none of them could figure out what the cause of his symptoms was. I referred Ron to the A.R.N.P. affiliated with the organization which I was working through. Ron did have a history of anxiety, and in the past he had success with the use of Xanax, a benzodiazepine. My initial goal was to get him prescribed this medication to help obtain some more significant sleep. It would be approximately three weeks before Ron had his appointment, so in the meantime we attempted sessions of talk therapy, which resulted in case management due to the severity of Ron's issue. I also referred him to a physician who practiced medicine, as well as hypnotherapy, in order to get another set of eyes on the problem.

During my third session with Ron and his wife, he began showing signs of hopelessness. I asked Ron if he would be willing to make a video explaining his condition and put it on *You Tube* and entitle it "medical mystery". I was desperate at this time, as I felt this was way beyond my scope of expertise and that perhaps someone from the global medical community would see the video and know how to treat this client. Ron had the video up within days and within a week the video went viral with almost 1 million views. One of those viewers happened to be Howard Stern, who subsequently invited Ron onto his show twice. From that exposure Ron was able to be seen by a loyal Stern follower who was also a neurologist in Port Charlotte, Florida. Since this client had no health insurance (he is a veteran whose benefits only kick in when he turns 60 years old), and he had been out of work for the past three years due to his condition, the neurologist was willing to see him for free.

I was beginning to have hope, however, the neurologist placed Ron on a medication that had no effect on his condition and did not follow up for more assistance. When Ron saw the A.R.N.P. she did prescribe Xanax as well as Celexa, an anti-depressant, since Ron's depression seemed to

be getting worse. Ron's belching began to slow down and we were able to do some real therapy. Ron began to exhibit hope. But after a few months, with the stress of his wife being diagnosed with throat cancer, Ron's condition got worse again. His condition evidently became worse with stress, but I still was not convinced that it was purely an anxiety disorder.

I began researching how the body's parasympathetic system worked, as it seemed that his belching must be connected to his partial colectomy. I learned that our gastrointestinal tract is innervated by the Vagus nerve. This nerve is responsible for the movement of food from our esophagus through to our colon, which is called peristalsis. The nerve has branches that innervate the parasympathetic nervous system. I found research involving people who have had their Vagus nerve damaged which resulted in a slowing of peristalsis. One way that the Vagus nerve can be damaged is when part of it is accidentally severed or nicked during a surgery. The resulting issues would depend upon the area in which this nerve was damaged.

I also learned that when peristalsis is slowed, a condition called *Gastroparesis* may occur. Gastroparesis is a backup of the food in the digestive tract, primarily due to an inability of the sphincter located between the esophagus and the stomach to open enough to allow the food to move freely through that area. This condition can result in belching. Additionally, the loosening, or opening of this sphincter is controlled by the Vagus nerve.

I questioned Ron more about the colon surgery and whether he had ever stopped belching since the surgery. Ron reported that soon after he began belching a gastroenterologist had prescribed Metoclopramide. The belching had stopped, but due to the toxicity of this medication, Ron began experiencing Parkinson's Disease-like symptoms, including *tardive dyskinesia*. Ron had to stop using this medication and the belching came back. When I researched Metoclopramide and its uses, I learned that it was used to treat Gastroparesis. I also learned that Xanax can be used to treat this condition.

The puzzle began to come together, and it began making sense why Ron's belching slowed down after beginning the Xanax. I asked Ron to make an appointment with the physician and see if he would raise his Xanax dose. The physician did so, and Ron's belching stopped. Soon after the improvement in Ron's condition, he and I were approached by The Discovery Channel. We were both interviewed for a show called *Diagnosis Unknown*. The producers of the show were impressed by the way I thought "outside of the box" by having Ron make a video and place it on YouTube, as well as my willingness to go above and beyond by researching the symptoms and medical history and by reaching out to other practitioners and working as a team to help this client. The show is scheduled to air this spring (2015).

Today, Ron is not belching however he struggles in other areas. He is having a difficult time returning to work after being out of his industry for three years. His wife ended up dying from the throat cancer she was diagnosed with while Ron was initially being treated by me. Ron struggles with depression and some anxiety due to his circumstances. When he gets stressed out,

Ron stated to me recently that he does begin belching but not nearly as severely as before. I have diagnosed Ron with 293.84 Anxiety Disorder due to Gastroparesis (a general medical condition). Ron continues in therapy.