Dostoevsy's epilepsy induced by television

The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) had a special type of epilepsy that was described by himself as sudden and brief episodes with an “aura” consisting of pleasure, happiness, and comfort, followed by tonic-clonic seizures. This type of epilepsy has been called “ecstatic epilepsy” or “Dostoevsky's epilepsy”; although it has been suggested that some historic personalities had the same type of seizures, Dostoevsky projected his affective experiences on to his literary characters—for example, in the case of Prince Myshkin in The Idiot.

We report a 25 year old woman, without prior personal or familial history of neurological disease, who was evaluated because of a 10 year history of recurrent paroxysmal “ecstatic” episodes induced by close proximity to a television screen. The episodes began abruptly with fixed posture and isolation from the external environment, which was followed by a sensation of “internal peace”, calmness, and intense pleasure without sexual connotations. She compared this sensation with “being drugged”, and to a sense of full personal satisfaction, as “watching the sea”. Her relatives had to separate her from the television to control the situation. Three episodes were followed by tonic-clonic seizures. When the patient was under an emotional stress, she alone was able to induce the episodes by placing herself in the front of the television set. The episodes were easily induced and were independent of the content of the television programme. Neurological examination, interictal EEG, cranial CT, and MRI were normal. An EEG obtained while she was approaching the television screen showed generalised spike and polyspike wave complexes lasting three seconds during which she had a mild degree of impaired awareness.

Our patient had “ecstatic epilepsy”, similar to that described by Dostoevsky. This type of epilepsy has rarely been reported. She is exceptional because of the induction by television and the presence of generalised epileptiform activity. Of the reported patients, only two had focal abnormalities in the brain, consisting of a right temporal tumour, and a right temporal epileptiform activity.
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