

# Alice in Wonderland Syndrome in childhood: Abuse is the root?

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## ABSTRACT

Alice in Wonderland Syndrome (AIWS) is named after a novel that was written by Lewis Carroll. The condition was first illustrated in 1955 by John Todd, a psychiatrist. Todd named it, for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll. Perchance, Lewis Carroll suffered from severe migraine and the disorder as well. Alice in Wonderland Syndrome is a disorienting condition that affects one's perception. AIWS is a neurological disorder that disturbs signals that are sent from the eyes to the brain, thereby causing a subsequent distortion in perception. The patients complain of visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations and altered perceptions. Alice in Wonderland Syndrome in childhood is very rare and can be baffling and terrifying for the patient; for he feels he is going mad in a weird world with warped perceptions and hallucinations. The causes for AIWS are still not known exactly. Migraine, temporal lobe epilepsy, brain tumors, depression, toxic and febrile delirium, psychoactive drugs, ischemic stroke and infections with EBV, mycoplasma and malaria are related features of AIWS. Neuroimaging studies reveal brain regions including the temporoparietal junction, the temporal lobe and the visual pathway, the occipital lobe. Abuse was yet not mentioned in this entity.

**Keywords:** Alice in Wonderland-child-Abuse

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## 1. Introduction

John Todd described the syndrome and gave it the literary name in his publication in 1955. The first description of the condition was made by Lippman in 1952. AIWS includes distortion of body image, shape of objects, sense of passage of time and zooming of the environment. In the book of Carroll, these altered changes in body form were interpreted as somesthetic migrainous auras. Migraine with somatosensory dysfunction is rare. Only few reports of migraine-associated body image hallucinations were found in literature. Other conditions show also phenomena of micro-or macrosomatognosia, epilepsy, encephalitis, cerebral masses, drug abuse and schizophrenia. Moreover the neurological symptoms of Alice included phenomena like stammering, mirror phenomena, mad hatter syndrome and prosopagnosia. The etiology is still not exactly ruled out. Many different etiological aspects were mentioned. Abuse was not mentioned in this serious condition.

## 2. Case Reports

D.H., a 59-year-old woman from Alabama, USA, contacted me in April 2018 by email. She told me, she heard of AIWS in the radio and contacted me after internet search. She described her egregious impressions as a child. She had Alize-like seizures as a child for many years. She had constant fear and stress especially with sexual abuse. These impressions were present between 6-8 years of life, referring to the time she was sexually abused. She developed visual hallucinations like huge furniture, big own hands and many other huge things. She described her own impressions in the period as horrific for any child to live with. She described her impressions as it like „Walking the dark house all alone at that young age, then tired all day at school, in trouble for that, the cycle....Abuse is the root“ (original description in the email). Further descriptions towards her serious abuse experiences were not further ruled out. To get closer „sensible“ information about this curiosity she finished to answer closer questions.

M.T., a 67 year-old woman from Great Britain (England) send emails in July 2018, nearly 3 months after the email

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contact with the 59 years old woman from USA, and contacted me, as an author of a publication relating with AIWS, describing her impressions as a child aged 5-11, with visual distortion frequently over years. She described it as „welcome escape“, a curiosity. She described visual distortions usually in the evening when in bed. She described the experiences as as a sort of visual distortion; everything appeared very far away, but very clear. Her arms appeared very long. It was a common experience, not unpleasant, but something which she never wanted to talk about. She had a very abusive childhood, often looked in the bedroom for long periods of time alone. She reported an abuse, sadly, physical and sexual abuse she suffered as a child from around age 4 until 11 years of age, corresponding with appearance of alicia seizures. She was described as „elective mute“, and did not speak safely until she was 8 years old. Aged 11 she was sent to live with friends of my parents as difficult, and happily remaining with my foster parents until leaving their home aged 17. After that, she had very little contact with her parents and siblings since.

### 3. Discussion

The foremost symptom of the Alice in Wonderland syndrome (AIWS) is an altered body image.<sup>[1]</sup> The person observes sizes of parts of the body wrongly. More often than not, the head and hands seem disproportionate, and in general, the person perceives growth of various parts rather than a reduction in their size. Another most significant symptom of the AIWS is that the patient perceives the sizes of various other objects inaccurately.<sup>[2,3]</sup> Some people experience strong hallucinations; they may visualize things that are not there and may also get the wrong impression about certain situations and events. Furthermore, like the visual perception gets warped, so does the auditory and tactile perception. Facts about the AIWS are still quite ambiguous; actually, many related features were published, but the real cause is yet not found.

Sexual abuse as a cause for AIWS is still not published and mentioned in literature. Children could reveal constant fear, visual and olfactorial hallucinations in cases of sexual abuse, realize the size of the surrounding „world“ in a different way, possibly want to hide away in this serious situation and realize the conditions as too big or small and develop psychotic hallucinations.

The personal experience of the 59-year-old patient from Alabama/USA and the 67 years old woman from England in childhood reveal a new possible but curious aspect in finding the origin of Alice in Wonderland syndrome. Further patients should be found describing similar perceptions relating with abuse and analyzed in this way.

### References

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