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April 1970

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Arch Gen Psychiatry. 1970;22(4):370-379. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.1970.01740280082015

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Abstract

BLINDNESS is a disability that irrevocably changes the course of a formerly sighted person's life. There have, however, been few systematic studies of the psychosocial effects of loss of sight, and none have considered in a comprehensive manner parameters such as the early psychological reaction, changes in socioeconomic status, persisting visual and other intrapsychic phenomenology, and adjustment and rehabilitation factors.

The present investigation was designed to study the reactions to loss of sight in a group of newly blinded adults of working age. For a representative sample, everyone living in a large and contiguous region of metropolitan London meeting

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Reactions to Blindness

An Exploratory Study of Adults With Recent Loss of Sight

Roy G. Fitzgerald, MD, Bethesda, Md

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This paper will describe the early reactions to loss of sight. Subsequent publications will deal with intrapsychic visual phenomenology of the newly blind, with some of the factors involved in later adjustment to blindness, and with implications for caregivers.

Subjects and Methods

The subjects were drawn from a region of metropolitan London subsuming a total population of 1.98 million people, or about one fifth of the city's population.¹ The region included inner urban, outer, and more suburban residential areas, and all socioeconomic groups. The subjects all had been certified as blind by a

central agency. An individual was regarded as blind if he was "so blind as to be unable to perform any work for which sight is essential."² The register was thought to be greater than 90% complete for the working-age group.

The study included all persons who had been registered as blind within the preceding year, who were 21 through 65 years of age, and who were able to communicate in spoken English. From these the following persons were excluded: two who were congenitally blind, four who had been blind more than five years (10 to 30 years), two who were deaf, two who were mentally retarded, four with severe organic brain damage from various causes who suffered from confusion, disorientation, and probable anosognosia, or aphasia, and two who had died. The median duration of blindness for those eligible was 1.2 years (Table 1).

All eligible persons were visited by a member of their local authority welfare department and asked to participate. Four persons refused to be interviewed. They were similar demographically to the rest of the sample, but were felt by their welfare workers to be among the most upset. The data from the blindness registration form² were recorded for those agreeing³ to be interviewed. I interviewed the subjects in their residences.

The interviews were informal and semistructured. Demographic data and personal and family histories before the onset of blindness were obtained. The subjects were encouraged by open-ended statements and questions to describe the details of loss of sight. Subsequent experiences, attitudes, feelings, and relationships were probed in detail and clarified with family members when necessary.

Results

Characteristics of the Final Sample.—Sixty-six subjects (35 men and 31 women) were

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Submitted for publication Sept 29, 1969.

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interviewed. The median age of the subjects was 55 and two-thirds were over 45. The age-sex distribution closely follows that for the total blind population of southern England,³ with a preponderance of men over 50 and women under 50. There were 9 widows, 4 men who were separated or divorced, 31 married, and 22 single persons. Seventeen

Arch Gen Psychiat—Vol 22, April 1970

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