What is Pseudobulbar Affect?

Pseudobulbar Affect (PBA) is a condition that causes frequent, uncontrollable outbursts of crying or laughing in people who have certain neurologic conditions or brain injuries. PBA can occur when there is damage to the part of the brain that controls emotion. This damage can disrupt brain signaling, causing an involuntary episode of crying or laughing.

Who gets PBA?

Nearly two million Americans with neurologic conditions or brain injuries are estimated to be affected by PBA. It can affect men and women, and both the old and the young. A recent national registry of more than 5,000 participants showed that 52% of people with brain injury had symptoms of PBA.

PBA treatment

There are treatments that can help with PBA symptoms. It is important to be able to accurately describe the symptoms to a doctor. Here are some things to think about in order to clearly describe the episodes:

- Is the episode exaggerated or inappropriate?
- Does the episode reflect the person’s feelings?
- Has the person avoided spending time with family or friends because of the outbursts?
- Could the crying be mistaken for depression?

Once the doctor is able to make a diagnosis, a treatment plan can be developed to help manage the PBA outbursts.

Tips for living with PBA

- Keep an episode diary to help understand what may trigger episodes.
- Be open with other people about PBA. Let them know that a person with PBA cannot always control their emotions because of a neurologic condition.
- It can help to distract oneself. If the person feels an episode coming on, it may help to focus on something unrelated.
- Take slow deep breaths until symptoms are under control.
- Release tension in the forehead, shoulders, and other muscle groups that tense up during a PBA episode.
- Note the posture that a person takes when having an episode. Then next time they feel they are about to cry or laugh, encourage them to change their posture into a different position.

Remember:

- If someone has an underlying neurologic condition or brain injury and are experiencing uncontrollable outbursts of crying or laughing, these episodes may be signs of PBA.