

LIFE & TIMES HEALTH



An over-inflated sense of worth, power, knowledge or identity is a sign of suffering **grandiose delusions**.

Delusions of grandeur

An expert tells **Nadia Badarudin** that an over-inflated sense of worth, power, knowledge or identity may indicate an underlying physical or psychological illness

TWENTY years ago, Al-Arqam was banned by the Government following alleged malpractice by the religious sect. Its founder, Ashaari Mohammad proclaimed himself as a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad and told followers that he had the ability to identify which follower would go to heaven. He also claimed that he possessed a special power to fight those opposing him.

Last year, businessman Noor Jan Tuah from Parit, Perak, made the headlines when he claimed to be the sultan of Malacca as he was a descendant of Parameswara, founder of the Malacca sultanate.

Stories of Ashaari and Al-Arqam, the "Malacca sultan" as well as countless tales of "healers" and "shamans" are part and parcel of our society.

Some cases shock the nation, while others leave the people amused and shaking their heads in disbelief.

Is there a logical explanation for such behaviour? Is there a reason why these people believe they are the "chosen ones"?

GRANDIOSE DELUSION

International Medical University Malaysia's consultant psychiatrist and associate professor Dr Philip George says an over-inflated sense of worth, power, knowledge or identity is the sign of suffering grandiose delusions.

He says a delusion is a fixed false belief that is not amenable to change even after being shown the evidence



the future."

He adds that a grandiose delusion may have a religious theme, such as when a person believes he is the messenger of God.

"The person might also believe he has a special relationship with a prominent person (such as being an adviser to the Prime Minister) or that he himself is a prominent figure," he says.

GRANDIOSE DELUSIONS VS NARCISSISM

Grandiose delusions should not be mistaken with a narcissistic personality disorder although both are linked to feelings of superiority.

Dr Philip explains that narcissistic personality disorder is a mental disorder in which a person has an inflated sense of his own importance and a deep need for admiration. Such a person believes he is superior to others and has little regard for other people's feelings.

"However, there are no delusions in personality disorders, so the person's beliefs are not fixed and can be shaken. In addition, personality disorders like narcissistic personality disorder usually starts from adolescence whereas the grandiose

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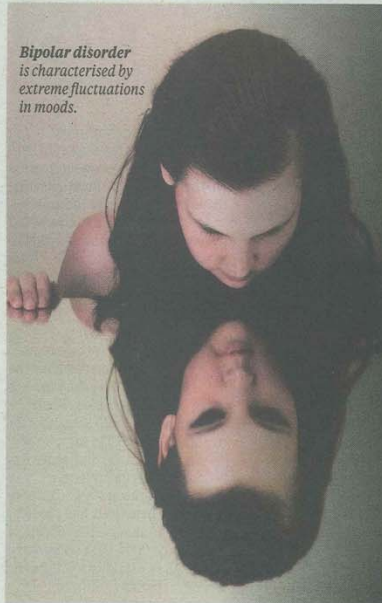
Dr Philip George

against it and that it is also not consistent with an individual's cultural and religious beliefs.

"There are many themes or types of delusions and grandiose is one theme. A person with this type of delusion has an over-inflated sense of worth, power, knowledge or identity," he says.

"This person might believe he has a great talent or has made an important discovery. For example, someone with no medical background is convinced that he can heal people who have cancer or someone may believe he has the power to predict

Bipolar disorder is characterised by extreme fluctuations in moods.



TROUBLED MINDS

WHAT IS DELUSIONAL DISORDER?

A serious type of mental illness where the person has psychosis. Psychosis is when a person cannot differentiate between what is real and what isn't real. Psychosis also occurs in schizophrenia, bipolar disorder as well as brain disorders or substance abuse disorders.

The main feature is the presence of delusions, which are unshakable beliefs in something untrue. People with delusional disorder experience non-bizarre delusions that involve real-life situations such as a feeling of being followed, poisoned, deceived, conspired against or loved from a distance.

These delusions usually involve the misinterpretation of perceptions or experiences. In reality, however, the situations are either not true or highly exaggerated.

WHAT IS BIPOLAR DISORDER?

It is a mood disorder characterised by extreme fluctuations in moods,

with periods of mania and periods of depression.

During the manic phase, the person may experience irritability, elevated mood or reduced need for sleep, and is involved in impulsive and risky behaviours. The person may also exhibit grandiose delusions during this phase.

The depressed phase of the illness has symptoms similar to major depression. Suicide attempts are likely.

WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?

A chronic, severe and disabling brain disorder similar to delusional disorder but with worse outcomes. People with schizophrenia show psychosis with hallucinations and delusions. They claim they hear voices and believe other people are reading their minds and controlling their thoughts or plotting to harm them.

They may not make sense when they talk and would show movement disorders such as stereotypy, mannerisms and catatonia.



delusions has a specific onset after a period of apparent normalness," he adds.

SYMPTOM, NOT DIAGNOSIS

Grandiose delusions are a symptom and not a diagnosis, says Dr Philip. It may be a symptom of brain disorder or dysfunction such as dementia, tertiary syphilis, Huntington's disease or other conditions that typically occur later in life.

He adds that having grandiose delusions may also be part of mental illnesses like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Some drug dependants also show symptoms of grandiose delusions, depending on the drugs used.

However, he says, grandiose delusions are more common in people with bipolar disorder. "Bipolar disorder is caused by a combination of psychological and environmental factors. It often occurs in upper socioeconomic classes and educated people," he says.

He explains that a person with grandiose delusions will be assessed through clinical psychiatric interviews, interviews with family mem-

bers and at times work reports, in order to uncover the underlying conditions.

"Other medical conditions or substance abuse need to be ruled out through appropriate investigations. Screening questionnaires such as the Psychosis Screener can also be used," he says.

TREATMENTS

Grandiose ideas can lead to creative and unique plans. Unfortunately, grandiose delusions can cause negative effects as this state of mind does not keep up with reality, so it must be treated.

Dr Philip says treatment is targeted at the disorder that shows the symptom of grandiose delusions.

"A person with bipolar disorder may find anti-psychotics and mood stabilisers helpful. Anti-psychotics are also important for schizophrenics," he says.

"Treatment for drug-dependants include detoxification, followed by relapse-prevention and maintenance. As for those with brain disorders, treating the original condition is imperative."

WHY BELIEVE?

In cases involving people with grandiose delusions, it is fascinating to take note of the behaviour of the believers and followers (often well-educated and cultured individuals).

Followers of the Al-Ma'unah militant group, for instance, believed that its leader Mohamed Amin Mohamed Razali could control one's mind and could perform a surgery from afar and without using any instrument.

Is there a psychological explanation for this as well?

Dr Philips says vulnerable individuals can be easy prey to believing people with grandiose delusions. "For instance, a person with grandiose delusions who believes he can cure cancer is likely to attract cancer patients who are in distress and losing hope. Believing and being convinced by the delusional person is likely to boost the patients' spirit," he says.

"It's just like the saying: In the land of the blind, the man with one eye is king."

✉ nadia_badarudin@nst.com.my



A person with *schizophrenia* has delusions and hallucinations.

MANIC BEHAVIOUR

BEN (not his real name) seemed a normal, quiet guy at college. However, a few months ago, he started behaving in a noticeably strange way. He would wake up at 5am and jog excessively for two hours. Then he would gather a group of people whom he met together at random while he exercised, and start preaching to them.

Ben had suddenly turned into an extrovert. He claimed he had heightened energy and stopped going to college because he felt he had a more important destiny. He believed

he would acquire some special power from God to change the world.

He started giving away his money and belongings to strangers and would get angry and violent towards those who tried to stop him.

Ben's family brought his case to the attention of Dr Philip George, consultant psychiatrist and associate professor at International Medical University Malaysia, who said Ben was suffering from the manic phase of bipolar disorder.

According to Helpguide.org, "feelings of heightened energy,

creativity and euphoria are common" in people experiencing the manic phase of bipolar disorder.

"They may also feel like they are all powerful, invincible or destined for greatness." It says that the manic phase can get out of control and sufferers can become delusional, as in Ben's case.

Dr Philip started Ben on a combination of mood stabiliser and anti-psychotic treatment. After four weeks, he was back in college. His condition has improved and he is now on medication to prevent a relapse.

