



Famous People WITH EPILEPSY

Literature throughout history has suggested various famous people had epilepsy. Since the dawn of time, epilepsy has affected millions of people, from beggars to kings. It is one of the oldest conditions of the human race with a rich and distinguished history.

The earliest references to epilepsy date back to the fifth millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia, where epileptic auras, generalized convulsions and other aspects of what these ancient people called "the falling disease" were recorded with remarkably accurate descriptions.

Ancient people thought epileptic seizures were caused by evil spirits or demons that had invaded a person's body. Priests attempted to cure people with epilepsy by driving the demons out of them with magic and prayers. This superstition was challenged by ancient physicians like Atreya of India and later Hippocrates of Greece, both of whom recognized a seizure as a dysfunction of the brain and not a supernatural event.

Nevertheless, the superstitious interpretation of epilepsy persisted for centuries. Attitudes of past societies toward epilepsy have left a legacy of stigma and damaging misconceptions which still persist today, as people with epilepsy continue to face fear, prejudice and discrimination in their everyday lives.

On the other hand, epileptic seizures have a power and symbolism which, historically, have suggested a relationship with creativity or unusual leadership abilities. Scholars have long been fascinated by evidence that prominent prophets and other holy men, political leaders, philosophers, and many who achieved great-ness in the arts and sciences, suffered from epilepsy.

Aristotle was apparently the first to connect epilepsy and genius. His catalogue of "great epileptics" (which included **Socrates**) was added to during the Renaissance. Only people from Western culture were included, however. So strong was this tradition that even in the nineteenth century, when new names of "great epileptics" were added, they were rarely chosen from among people in other parts of the world. Working from this biased historical legacy, the famous people with epilepsy that we know about are primarily white males.

But what about this so-called "epilepsy and genius" connection? Certainly, most people with epilepsy would not consider their seizure disorder as something which enhances their natural abilities. According to Dr. Jerome Engel, Professor of Neurology at the University of California School of Medicine and author of the book [Seizures and Epilepsy](#):

"There is no evidence... that either epileptic seizures or a predisposition to epilepsy is capable of engendering exceptional talents. Rather, the occasional concurrence of epilepsy and genius most likely reflects the probability that a common disorder will at times afflict people with uncommon potential."

Dr. Engel considers the co-existence of epilepsy and genius to be a coincidence. Others disagree, claiming to have found an association between epilepsy and giftedness in some people. Eve LaPlante in her book [Seized](#) writes that the abnormal brain activity found in temporal lobe (complex partial) epilepsy plays a role in creative thinking and the making of art. Neuropsychologist Dr. Paul Spiers says:

"Sometimes the same things that cause epilepsy result in giftedness. If you damage an area [of the brain] early enough in life, the corresponding area on the other side has a chance to overdevelop."

We know that epilepsy involves temporary bursts of excessive electrical activity in different locations in the brain, locations which house our bodily sensations and functions as well as our memories and emotions. Psychiatrist Dr. David Bear states that the abnormal brain activity found in temporal lobe epilepsy can play a role in creative thinking and the making of art by uniting sensitivity, insight and sustained, critical attention. According to Dr. Bear:

"A temporal lobe focus in the superior individual may spark an extraordinary search for that entity we alternately call truth or beauty."

What is also clear in the discussion of genius and epilepsy is that some of the most famous people in history had seizures. People with epilepsy have excelled in every area. What follows is a list of people who are responsible for changing civilization as we know it, all of whom are strongly suspected or known to have had epilepsy. It's an impressive group.

Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia about 2,300 years ago and one of the greatest generals in history, and was

reported to have epilepsy. At the time epilepsy was known as "the sacred disease" because of the belief that those who had seizures were possessed by evil spirits or touched by the gods and should be treated by invoking mystical powers.

Julius Caesar, another brilliant general and formidable politician, apparently had seizures in the last two years of his life, possibly caused by a brain tumour. Caesar was known to have fallen convulsing into the River Tiber. By this time, epilepsy had become known as "the falling sickness" because the kind of seizures that made a person lose consciousness and fall down were the only kind then recognized as epilepsy. (Complex partial seizures were not added until the middle of the nineteenth century.) Human blood was widely regarded by the Romans as having curative powers, and people with epilepsy in Caesar's time were commonly seen sucking blood from fallen gladiators.

Napoleon Bonaparte was probably the most brilliant military figure in history. He too was suspected of having epilepsy.

Another extraordinary leader of a very different time and place reported to have epilepsy was **Harriet Tubman**, the black woman who led hundreds of her fellow slaves from the American South to freedom in Canada on the Underground Railroad. Tubman developed her seizure disorder through sustaining a head injury: her slave master hit her in the head with a rock.

"Some of the most famous people in history had seizures. People with epilepsy have excelled in every area."

According to Dr. Jerome Engel, a number of men and women who have attained religious prominence may have done so in spite of, or perhaps due to, their epileptic signs and symptoms. In fact epilepsy, as "the sacred disease," has been profoundly intertwined with religious practices throughout the ages and the world.

Saint Paul's seizure-like experiences are the best documented of the major religious figures. On the road to Damascus he saw a bright light flashing around him, fell to the ground and was left temporarily blinded by his vision and unable to eat or drink. Paul is thought by some physicians to have had facial motor and sensitive disturbances coming after ecstatic seizures; they have diagnosed him with temporal lobe epilepsy which occasionally developed into secondary tonic-clonic attacks.

Joan of Arc was an uneducated farmer's daughter in a remote village of medieval France who altered the course of history through her amazing military victories. From age thirteen Joan reported ecstatic moments in which she saw flashes of light coming from the side, heard voices of saints and saw visions of angels.

"There is no evidence that having seizures or epilepsy can cause exceptional talents."

In the opinion of the neurologist Dr. Lydia Bayne, Joan's blissful experiences "in which she felt that the secrets of the universe were about to be revealed to her"- were seizures, and they were triggered by the ringing of church bells. Joan displayed symptoms of a temporal lobe focus epilepsy: specifically, a musicogenic form of reflex epilepsy with an ecstatic aura. Musicogenic epilepsy is generally triggered by particular music which has an emotional significance to the individual. Joan's voices and visions propelled her to become a heroic soldier in the effort to save France from English domination and led to her martyrdom in 1431, burned at the stake as a heretic when she was 19 years old.

Soren Kierkegaard, the brilliant Danish philosopher and religious thinker considered to be the father of existentialism, was thought to have epilepsy and worked hard at keeping it a secret.

People with epilepsy have also been prominent in the sciences. Literature suggests that **Pascal** had epilepsy, as well as **Sir Isaac Newton**, who was perhaps the greatest scientific genius of all time. **Alfred Nobel**, the Swedish chemist and industrialist who invented dynamite and financed the Nobel Prize, is another exceptional man of science thought to have had epilepsy.

In the fine arts, **Vincent van Gogh** is today probably the most widely known and appreciated artist suspected of having epilepsy. "The storm within" was how van Gogh described his typical seizure, which consisted of hallucinations, unprovoked feelings of anger, confusion and fear, and floods of early memories that disturbed him because they were outside his control.

Van Gogh also had convulsive seizures; a hospital worker witnessed Vincent having one while painting outside. He was prescribed potassium bromide as an anticonvulsant and ordered to spend countless hours bathing in tubs at the asylum in Saint-Remy. His most troubling seizures peaked with his greatest art in the south of France, where he painted *A Starry Night*, the extraordinary *Self-Portrait*, and the famous *Crows in the Wheatfields*.

There have been a number of prominent composers and musicians reported to have seizures. **George Frederick**

Handel, the famous baroque composer of the Messiah, is one. **Niccolo Paganini** is another. Paganini was an Italian violinist and composer considered by many to be the greatest violinist of all time. The eminent Russian composer of the ballets Sleeping Beauty and The Nutcracker, **Peter Tchaikovsky**, is believed to have had epilepsy. **Ludwig van Beethoven**, one of the greatest masters of music, may have had epilepsy as well.

The list of famous authors and playwrights whom historians believe had epilepsy is overwhelming. It includes: **Dante**, the author of The Divine Comedy, who is not only Italy's pre-eminent poet but one of the towering figures of Western literature; **Moliere**, the master comic dramatist of the eighteenth century whose plays Tartuffe, The Imaginary Invalid and The Misanthrope are still being regularly performed today; **Sir Walter Scott**, one of the foremost literary figures of the romantic period whose books like Ivanhoe and Waverley remain widely read classics; the 18th century English satirist **Jonathan Swift**, author of Gulliver's Travels; the nineteenth century American author **Edgar Allan Poe**; as well as three of the greatest English Romantic poets, **Lord Byron**, **Percy Bysshe Shelley**, and **Alfred, Lord Tennyson**.

Tennyson's "waking trances" began in adolescence, and as a young man he was diagnosed with epilepsy, which ran in the Tennyson family. British doctors of that era were reluctant to report epilepsy in respected families because they thought seizures arose from the genitals and masturbation was the cause of epilepsy! In fact, up until the nineteenth century, one of the extreme approaches to epilepsy was castration for men or clitoridectomy for women, which were thought to work by ending masturbation. Tennyson's doctor recommended European spas where the poet's epilepsy 'treatment' consisted of drinking large amounts of water, walking long distances in bad weather, and being submersed, wrapped in sheets, into cold baths.

Tennyson's seizures involved a loss of the sense of self. Describing these mystic visions, he wrote:

"All at once, out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being; and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words." In his poem The Ancient Sage, he describes it this way:

"..and thro' loss of Self

The gain of such large life as matched with ours

Were sun to spark- unshadowable in words,

Themselves but shadows of a shadow world."

"A temporal lobe focus in the superior individual may spark an extraordinary search for truth or beauty."

Charles Dickens, the Victorian author of such classic books as A Christmas Carol and Oliver Twist was suspected of having epilepsy, and several of the characters in his books has seizures as well. The medical accuracy of Dickens's descriptions of epilepsy has amazed the doctors who read him today.

Lewis Carroll, in his famous stories Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass, may have been writing about his own temporal lobe seizures. The very sensation initiating Alice' adventures- that of falling down a hole- is a familiar one to many people with seizures. Alice often feels that her own body (or the objects around her) is shrinking or growing before her eyes, another seizure symptom. Carroll recorded his seizures, which were followed by prolonged headaches and feeling not his usual self, in his journal.

From his writings we know a lot about the epilepsy of the great Russian novelist **Fyodor Dostoevsky**, author of such classics as Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov, who is considered by many to have brought the Western novel to the peak of its possibilities.

It was reported that Dostoevsky had his first seizure at age nine. After a remission which lasted up to age 25, he had seizures every few days or months, fluctuating between good and bad periods. His ecstatic auras occurring seconds before his bigger seizures were moments of transcendent happiness, which then changed to an anguished feeling of dread. He saw a blinding flash of light, then would cry out and lose consciousness for a second or two. Sometimes the epileptic discharge generalized across his brain, producing a secondary tonic-clonic (grand mal) seizure. Afterward he could not recall events and conversations that had occurred during the seizure, and he often felt depressed, guilty and irritable for days. Epilepsy is a central source of themes, personalities, and events in his books; he gave epilepsy to about 30 of his characters.

The great nineteenth century Russian author, Count **Leo Tolstoy**, author of Anna Karenina and War and Peace, also may have had epilepsy.

Modern doctors have diagnosed **Gustave Flaubert**, the nineteenth century French literary genius who wrote such

masterpieces as *Madame Bovary* and *A Sentimental Education*, with "complex partial epilepsy of occipital-temporal origin, secondary to lesion of the left posterior hemisphere with occasional secondary generalization of seizures." Flaubert's typical seizure began with a feeling of impending doom, after which he felt his sense of self grow insecure, as if he had been transported into another dimension. He wrote that his seizures arrived as "a whirlpool of ideas and images in my poor brain, during which it seemed that my consciousness, that my me sank like a vessel in a storm." He moaned, had a rush of memories, saw fiery hallucinations, foamed at the mouth, moved his right arm automatically, fell into a trance of about ten minutes, and vomited. His father, a doctor, ordered him to take regular bleedings with leeches. Flaubert abandoned these useless treatments and resigned himself to live with his epilepsy.

Flaubert gave features of these seizures (none described as epilepsy) to various characters, including the heroine of *Madame Bovary*, who falls into a stupor while crossing a field, and the title character in his book *The Temptation of St. Anthony*.

Modern writers who were reported to have epilepsy include: Dame **Agatha Christie**, the leading British writer of mystery novels, and **Truman Capote**, American author of *In Cold Blood* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Modern actors with epilepsy include **Richard Burton**, **Michael Wilding** and **Margaux Hemingway**.

This is just a sampling of the many, many famous people whose epilepsy has been recorded by historians. But what about our contemporaries- the gifted celebrities of today who have epilepsy? Unfortunately, we don't know who they are. That's because even today, in an era when epileptic seizures are known to be common neurological events and not supernatural ones, the misconceptions and stigma attached to epilepsy remains. Today, celebrities with epilepsy remain "in the closet," concerned that going public with their epilepsy will result in negative treatment and harm their employment opportunities. This is a shame, because people living with epilepsy- people who are neither geniuses nor celebrities- deserve to have role models to inspire them, and leaders to raise public awareness and understanding of their disorder.

Thankfully, we have the historical record of so many extraordinarily accomplished people with epilepsy to inspire the discouraged and enlighten the world.

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