



Understanding Coprophenomena

By Lisa Rudge



There are many misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding Tourette's Syndrome (TS) that make life harder for those living with it. Coprophenomena is the involuntary use of words or gestures that society may deem unacceptable. Coprophenomena typically gains the most attention in the media, however not everyone with Tourette's Syndrome (TS) have this aspect, and it is not listed in the diagnostic criteria for TS.

Coprophenomena occurs across all classes, cultures and races. It is important to understand that it is **NOT** due behavioural choices, is **NOT** down to bad parenting and does **NOT** reflect the person's thoughts or beliefs.

The reason why coprophenomena occurs is as yet unknown, but it is thought that these, like other tics in TS, involve the basal ganglia, the part of the brain that filters unwanted movements and inhibit our need to say or do things, and also neurotransmitters including dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine.

Coprophenomena affects approximately 10% of those with Tourette's Syndrome, and typically affects boys more than girls. Those who experience severe tics are more likely to present with coprophenomena, in addition to those who have multiple co-occurring conditions.

Coprophenomena is an umbrella term that includes the following:

- **Coprolalia** – this is a complex vocal tic and involves the involuntary vocalisation of words or phrases that may be culturally taboo, socially unacceptable or inappropriate due to age or context. This can include things like swear words, phrases of a sexual nature, offensive comments about a person’s appearance, sexuality, ethnicity and blasphemy. Non Obscene Socially Inappropriate (NOSI) tics, such as shouting “bomb” at an airport, can also be classified as Coprolalia.

Coprolalia can present as single words, more complex phrases, or can be seem contextual in conversation may seem incorporated into normal, fluent speech.

Mental Coprolalia describes these phrases or words being said inside the persons head as thoughts, without speaking them out loud.

- **Copropraxia** – this is a complex motor tic and is the name given to the involuntary performance of obscene or inappropriate gestures, for example putting two fingers up in an offensive manner. It also includes touching oneself or others in an inappropriate way.
- **Coprophilia** – this is also a motor tic, and is involuntary urge to write down obscene or inappropriate words or phrases as described above, or to draw inappropriate images. Coprophilia also describes the involuntary urge to type or text obscene or inappropriate words.

Coprophenomena, just like any other tic, is experienced differently in every individual. Symptoms may be inconsistent, changeable in type, intensity and frequency, and is often increased by stress

Living with Coprophenomena:

- Therapies such as CBIT (Comprehensive Behaviour intervention for Tics), HRT (Habit Reversal Therapy), and Mindfulness may help to divert or manage these types of tics.
- Anxiously focusing on these types of tics or symptoms, or anxiously trying to suppress or hold in these tics, may make the tics happen more frequently and/or with greater intensity.
- Finding ways to explain coprolalia or other coprophenomena to others can be a helpful strategy (for example teachers, employers, police etc), and can be very useful if you find yourself in a difficult situation as a result of a tic. Being able to articulate that the word / action was involuntary, unwanted and not intended can help with misunderstandings.
- Some people find that disguising tics may help lessen the impact of the tic, such as mouthing the tic without sound for coprolalia, or performing the tic in a pocket or within a sleeve for copropraxia.

