

If you were a deep-sea fish, you might explode

By JON RUST
Managing Editor

Editor's note: The DTH was prepared to offer anonymity to any student willing to talk about his or her bout with the affliction, Pressure-Void Syndrome (PVS). Only one came forward. For the sake of protecting that student from possible peer ostracization this student will be identified in this story by the false name Ed Meese.

It's called PVS for short. Its official name is Pressure-Void Syndrome. There are no official statistics kept by anyone, in the private health industry or the federal government, on how many Americans are assaulted by this debilitating and potentially fatal illness each year. All that is definite is that its victims tend to be college students on summer vacation.

When asked about PVS by this reporter, no UNC students admitted having heard about it. Someone who does know about PVS explained that this is part of the problem. "Students are unwilling to talk about PVS in general," he said. "They fear that they might be the only ones suffering from it, and if their friends were to find out about their problem, they might find themselves shut out socially."

Meanwhile, more students may be

leading lifestyles that make them susceptible to the illness.

PVS is a negative contrary to "stressing out." As one informed person explained, "Too many people think of pressure as either on or off. You have it or you don't. We, who are working with PVS, call this 'positive' stress. 'Negative' stress, on the other hand, is the inner stress pushing out resulting from not having any outer stress pushing in. It really shouldn't be called negative 'stress' because it really isn't stress, as the term is usually employed. It's the active stress 'void.' This void has been named PVS to avoid confusion."

As an aid to visualizing PVS, many specialists, although they are slowly moving away from using this example, point to the deep-sea fish that explodes when brought to sea level. The fish, which swims merrily under several tons of water, biologically cannot deal with the lessened pressure.

Some college students are just like these deep-sea fish. Once summer vacation begins, the absence of having to read six chapters of physics in a night or the lack of worrying about a paper due on the morrow can have horrific consequences.

The reason PVS specialists are no longer using the fish example as often as they did in the past is that new

evidence indicates that the illness might be more psychological than physical. And specialists don't want to muddy the water about PVS talking about fish.

Better understanding of PVS on college campuses is sorely needed, said one informed source. To illustrate this point, he introduced this reporter to Ed Meese, a confessed victim of PVS.

"I don't know how I got it," Meese said. "It just snuck up on me when I was a sophomore. I don't know exactly when it happened. Maybe it took control when I was working to be elected to Student Congress, or when I was helping to organize a Campus Y event."

"Anyway, last summer when I got home, I thought I was just going to die. It wasn't that I was bored. There just wasn't enough stress on me. I offered to take my brother to school every morning and then do the grocery shopping before work."

"My job during the day wasn't enough. It ended at 5 o'clock. There was nothing to worry about at night."

"So that's when I started reading all the newspapers and writing letters to as many world leaders as I could. I wasn't satisfied unless I wrote at least five per day, telling Gorbachev to 'take it easy' on the refuseniks and Daniel Ortega to 'get real' in Nicaragua."

"I figured it couldn't hurt the world situation. And there was always the outside chance something might get accomplished, and I could take credit, maybe even some day publicize my letters and run for president."

"Not until I was back in school did I feel comfortable again."

Ed Meese is probably not alone. But as the one informed person said, "We're not sure if he's alone. There aren't many students coming forward with this problem. We're not sure what's holding them back."

Several UNC students were asked, first, whether they were concerned that they had never heard of PVS. And then questions were hurled at them about whether they knew anybody who suffered from the illness, and how they thought a solution to it should be approached.

Lisa Schiermeier, a junior medical technology major from Cary, said that she didn't know how significant it was that she hadn't heard about PVS before. "There are a lot of things that the general public is not aware of. I'm sure people will be better informed as time goes by."

"I don't think any of my friends suffer from PVS," Schiermeier continued. "I tend to associate with people who can deal with pressure. But it might inflict SJ people more than a TJ, or rather, more of a TJ person than an FP."

This reporter was baffled by Schiermeier's terms and did not pursue the topic with her.

Freshman journalism/political science major Kim Maxwell from Marietta, Ga., explained that the rigors of the college a student attends probably affect whether or not he has a greater chance of acquiring PVS. "Students at UNC, Harvard and Princeton probably suffer a lot more," she said.

When asked whether she worried if she might have PVS, Maxwell replied, "I've been killing myself this term. It's been tough. And sometimes, when I have some free time, I wonder if there isn't something that I should be doing."

"During Christmas break, I remember asking myself if there was a book that I should be reading for next semester," Maxwell continued.

"But I don't think that the federal government should be involved or even that we should spend too much time worrying. We're handling enough problems already. And there

are more pressing ones, like the homeless, the deficit, civil rights, and dealing with each other without conflict over personal differences overall," the Georgia native said.

"I'm not bothered by PVS," chimed in Reggie Hewett, a freshman from Supply.

"I don't have a lot of pressure at home because I don't have a lot of pressure on me here," he continued.

David Borroff, a senior English major from Pittsford, N.Y., said that more self-discipline and better time-management in and out of school would probably cure the illness.

"I deal with it by setting rough time schedules," Borroff said.

Ed Meese, when told what the other UNC students said, responded, "It's not enough. They don't understand. Simple time management won't do it."

It's unlikely that students like Ed Meese will be cured soon. The Student Health Service does not currently have anybody working especially with PVS patients, partly because PVS strikes the student at home and not while he or she is on campus.

The UNC medical school curriculum does not list courses on treating those afflicted with the illness. And counselors at the Student Development and Counseling Center confessed that they had not heard of PVS before.

One counselor did explain, however, that the center does work with high-achieving individuals who have an inability to relax. These persons fail to adapt to changing situations.

Students need to learn to relax — just as much as they need to learn when it's time to work.

If students don't learn how to relax, they could end up like Ed Meese. And if they do learn, well, they might end up like the real Ed Meese.

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