

Recent increase in Functional Tic-like behaviors (FTLB) among teens related to social media usage

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During the COVID 19 pandemic pediatricians have seen a significant increase in anxiety and depression among teens. In the midst of this, a 17-year-old girl comes to clinic complaining of recent onset of disruptive repetitive movements and outbursts that have had her dismissed from class. She has history of depression and anxiety diagnosed due to worsening of mood and panic attacks that developed during the first year of the COVID 19 pandemic lockdowns. Her symptoms are very debilitating and she exhibits frequent swearing. Curiously, she mentions other people with similar tics on TikTok as a source of support for her during the ongoing stresses of life during the pandemic. She may have Functional Tic-like behaviors (FTLB).

[Sudden, idiopathic onset of tics was quite uncommon before the pandemic, but a recent published report suggests that they now represent 35% of new tic cases.](#) These cases appear to be psychological rather than neurological and bear many dissimilarities from classical tic disorders like Tourette syndrome.

- Tic disorders typically affect boys more than girls in a 4:1 ratio and appear around 5-7 years. FTLB on the other hand overwhelmingly affects teenage girls.
- Movements and vocalizations associated with FTLB are usually complex rather than the simple motor tics associated with Tourette syndrome.
- Many patients do not describe the premonitory urge of other tic disorders.
- ADHD and OCD are common co-morbidities with Tourette syndrome, while anxiety and depression are more likely with FTLB
- Coprolalia and self-harm are also much more common with FTLB compared to Tourette syndrome.
- FTLB associated with social media use involves similar behaviors between patients rather than the unique tics present in Tourette syndrome. [Investigation of TikTok videos tagged with #tic or #Tourette found multiple users who posted videos of themselves displaying similar tics such as shouting “beans” or performing stereotyped behaviors such as clapping or pointing.](#)

Behaviors viewed on social media like TikTok may trigger onset of FTLB, but it may also play a significant role in maintaining these behaviors as many patients describe a sense of belonging and support from sharing their own tics on these sites.

As with other functional neurological disorders, behavioral therapy is the mainstay of treatment, although removing social media triggers can also be helpful. In some cases, simply describing the phenomenon and discussing functional tics with the patient and family can result in a dramatic improvement in symptoms. Medication for tics has not been helpful for these patients, although of course they may benefit from medications for anxiety and depression.

Further Reading

[COVID-19 related increase in childhood tics and tic-like attacks](#)

[Rapid Onset Functional Tic-Like Behaviors in Young Females During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[Rapid onset of functional tic-like behaviours in young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[TikTok Tics: A Pandemic Within a Pandemic](#)

["I swear it is Tourette's!": On functional coprolalia and other tic-like vocalizations](#)