

## Brief Clinical Report

# A Case of Folie à Deux

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### Abstract

*In this case history a delusion shared between a mother and daughter serves to prevent their ever facing their anxiety or resolving the daughter's failure to achieve independence.*

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Folie à deux, or shared psychotic disorder, exists when two people share the same delusion or system of delusional ideas and support one another in this belief. It is found in two people who have an unusually close relationship where an active delusional partner induces the delusion in the passive member of the pair.

### Brief Clinical Report

Marjorie is a 67-year-old, widowed woman who came to my office because of panic attacks. She suffered from anxiety since adolescence but her family ridiculed her and refused to believe she had a problem. When she was 18 she saved up money and went to see a psychiatrist on her own. For the first time in her life she felt listened to and understood, and left his office feeling remarkably better. At nineteen, she married an alcoholic man whom she didn't love in order to get away from her family and suffered for many years in an unhappy marriage. Her husband died of cirrhosis of the liver 10 years prior to consultation and she described herself as a "healed widow," happier without him than with him. Since his death, she lived with her 47-year-old, unmarried daughter and this was the crux of her current fear: She believed her daughter was soon going to move out of their home and leave her all alone.

Despite having had psychiatric treatment off and on for years, Marjorie was, nevertheless, often suspicious and mistrustful of me. She was deeply religious and belonged to a fundamentalist church that practiced faith healing and the casting out of spirits. Her mistrust of me often took the form of accusing me of wrong beliefs. She believed I was “ungodly” and that God had sent her to me to aid in my salvation. I encouraged her to speak of these things as a way of expressing, and resolving, her suspicion of me. Gradually, I came to understand her deeply mystical view of the world. Both she and her daughter believed that God was calling them to do His work in some special but unknown way. For example, her daughter had not dated a man since the breakup of a relationship in high school. Nevertheless, both devoutly believed that she was soon to be reunited with this boyfriend of 30 years ago. Both firmly believed that this reconciliation was imminent and part of God’s plan for them. Marjorie longed for her daughter to be happy but also greatly feared living alone.

Marjorie never took my advice nor did she accept any interpretation from me until she went home and prayed about it. We came to agree that since all healing truly came from God, I was there only to facilitate her healing. This arrangement had some advantages because it diminished the intensity of the transference relationship and feelings which were quite terrifying for her.

At some points in her therapy she appeared to be thoroughly stuck emotionally and spiritually. She prattled on in a superficial way or stubbornly resisted my efforts to have her breathe or make noise as a way of stopping her pointless talking. She became adept at recognizing these episodes by observing their profound effect on me—I suddenly became tired and my eyes closed. We discovered that these episodes always took place when she had chosen to avoid speaking about some painful truth. On one such occasion when she had been prattling aimlessly, I pointed out that she must be avoiding some important issue. She in turn accused me of not doing enough to help her so I reminded her that healing came from God, not me, and I suggested that she returned home she should pray about it.

She returned for the next session and told me that God had answered her prayer with the revelation that “The truth shall set you free.” She felt she didn’t understand the revelation and was waiting for God’s truth to be revealed to her. I suggested to her that God’s truth was already in her in the form of her emotions, and that by hiding them she was resisting God’s will. To my surprise, she accepted this immediately and recognized that her “spirit of fear and guilt,” which she believed had possessed her since early childhood, was the reason she was afraid to voice her feelings, and was not only an impediment in her life but also an impediment to her relationship with God.

The revelation that “The truth shall set you free” flourished in Marjorie and she became more open about what she thought and felt. She confessed that she had “a crush” on me and was relieved when I reassured her that this sometimes happens in therapy and she agreed with my assessment that it was an expression of gratitude for my treating her with kindness. She revealed that she had a “mental breakdown” at age 13. Her mother and her sister made fun of her for it and when she insisted they took her to their family doctor who threatened to commit her to the state psychiatric hospital. She was not committed, but she felt terrified and misunderstood, and to this day she felt great anger at her mother and her sister. It was this hidden anger that led, in part, to her “spirit of guilt and fear.” She also talked more openly about her disappointment in her marriage. She was now less anxious and going out more with her female friends. She marveled that each seemed to enjoy their relationship with their husband if they were alive or missed them if they had died. For the first time in her therapy she became critical of her daughter’s behavior, “She just takes and never gives anything back.” This surprised me because she had always been extremely protective of her daughter, seeing her as a victim but also as someone specially chosen by God to do His work.

### **Discussion**

One feature central to medical orgone therapy in the treatment of a psychotic symptom such as folie à deux is understanding the function

of the delusion. In Marjorie's case, she lived with her 47-year-old daughter who never managed to achieve independence. They have remained emotionally dependent on each other, with the shared delusion of a mystical reconciliation with a long lost boyfriend and a special calling to do God's work. This protects the sanctity of their relationship while simultaneously defending against their shared fears for the daughter's future and the anxiety inherent in any separation of the two. It goes without saying that doing God's work also ensures that open and honest communication about their special relationship will never occur.