

**Movie:** *Stephen King's It* (1990)

### **Synopsis**

Set in the town of Derry, Maine in the 1950's, Stephen King's miniseries *It* depicts a supernatural character, Pennywise the Dancing Clown, terrorizing a childhood group of friends, the "Losers Club." Pennywise pulls Georgie to his demise after his paper boat floats into the sewer. The death of Georgie rocks the group and, under his brother's guidance, they vow to avenge his death and all those killed by *It*.

When they hear about a mysterious, unexplained death of a little girl who was brutally murdered 30 years later in Derry, Bill begins to suspect *It* has returned. They honor their blood pact even if it means re-experiencing their childhood trauma. The "Losers Club" as successful adults are on board, but Stan, the only club member with recall of the events from his childhood, commits suicide, writing the word "IT" in the wall with his blood.

### **How it relates to the Field of Psychiatry**

*It* serves as an opportunity to teach the Dissociative Disorders (DD). Much like the presence of the supernatural, demonic (fang teeth and three-fingered creature-like hands) shape-shifter is a chronic reminder of Derry's sinister past, the DD are severe and persistent mental illnesses defined by a disruption or discontinuity in integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behavior (1).

Dissociative symptoms occur in the context of traumatic stressors as an attempt to maintain emotional equilibrium, but may result in distress and dysfunction. This is evident in many of the childhood characters in the story. For example, Ben is traumatized by the visions of his dead father (*It*) trying to lure him into the sewer plant. Eddie struggles with chronic medical illnesses for which he is taunted and harassed. Mike, an African American, has a difficult time transitioning as a new student because of the racism and bullying he faces.

In the second half of the story, the losers-as-adults return to Derry to battle the interdimensional predator. All but Stan suffer from severe Dissociative Amnesia, unable to recall the traumatic events of their childhood. They agree to split up and visit the old neighborhood in an effort to recapture their lost memories before *It* discovers their intentions and devours them. Despite suffering only mild dissociative symptoms, Stan's completed suicide is a realistic depiction of the impact dissociative disorders can have; there is an increase risk in suicide attempts among those suffering from DD (2).

The catatonia that Bill's wife Audra experiences after coming in contact with *It's* "deadlights" is a sign seen in extreme cases of dissociation from trauma.

**References:**

1. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.)
2. V. Sar and C. Ross, "Dissociative disorders as a confounding factor in psychiatric research," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 129–144, 2006

**Keywords:** demons, supernatural, dissociation, dissociative disorders, dissociative identity disorder, dissociative amnesia, catatonia

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As each of them face their greatest fears (as well as Henry Bowers's harassment), they vow to avenge the deaths of George and every other child killed by "It." and the second when they return to Derry (1985) to fulfill their childhood pact they're called back as adults to defeat Pennywise, who has resurfaced. While trying to recover lost memories, they witness manifestations of IT

Transforms into its prey's worst fears, exploiting the phobias of its victims.  
Predatory life-form.  
Pennywise the Dancing Clown is the main form it takes

"I'm everything you were every afraid of"

(establishing early childhood trauma). His 12-year-old brother, Bill ([Jonathan Brandis](#)) is overwhelmed with guilt for inadvertently sending Georgie to his death and is terrorized when his picture comes to life, giving him a stutter from the trauma. He calls up each of his friends, who have all become successful in their own right. comfortable lives and having barely a glimmer of the memories of that summer, they are all traumatized by the memories awakened by Mike's phone calls. While they agreed to return as promised, Stan is unable to cope with the fear and commits suicide, writing the word "IT" on the bathroom wall with his blood.

Dissociation symptoms can present as normal experiences like day dreaming and transient lapses in attention to a pathological failure to integrate thoughts, feelings, memories, and actions into a coherent and unified sense of consciousness.

Derealization

Trauma is what triggers dissociation- this is clear in each character

### **Movie: IT (1990) Synopsis**

The seminal movie of the 'demonic possession' subgenre is William Friedkin's 1973 film adaptation of *The Exorcist*. Like our trip through Connecticut (*The Conjuring*) in Week 5, the film and its novel are based on true events. In a 1972 *New York Times* article titled "Everyone's Reading It, Billy's Filming It," Chris Chase reported that Peter Blatty based his novel on the 1949 *Washington Post* story, "Priest Frees Mt. Rainier Boy Reported Held in Devil's Grip." Details are provided in the personal diary of Fr. Raymond Bishop who performed over 30 exorcisms on 13-year-old Roland Doe. Supernatural occurrences noted in the diary included, but were not limited to, distortions in Doe's voice (1). It has been speculated that Doe's behavior may have been the result of a Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorder Associated with Streptococcal (PANDAS) infection.

### **How it relates to the field of psychiatry:**

At Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, the first module – titled

Necromancy – of our year-long resident Psychopathology course focuses on ghosts (wraiths) and demons. While the former references disorders that are episodic in nature, tales of demonic possession serve to reinforce teaching points of chronic and persistent illnesses such as the Dissociative Disorders (DD). At the completion of the DD block, participants should appreciate that movies about demonic possession may be metaphorically interpreted as case studies of dissociation. For example, the hallmark characteristic of Dissociative Identity Disorder, a disruption of identity, may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession (DSM-5).

Another pedagogic lesson of *The Exorcist* references Holotropic Breathwork (HB). HB combines music with accelerated breathing to reach an “altered state of consciousness” as a form of self- exploration and psychotherapy. In their book (2), the Grofs describe the experience of demonic energy as “a change in facial and vocal expression...their voice is deep and raspy...spastic contractions make their hands look like claws, and their entire body tenses. [They] can muster physical strength.” After an outburst, everything quiets down and there is an eerie silence.

Regan demonstrates the pathognomonic description of demonic energy, which is associated with reliving memories of severe childhood trauma. The absence of her father and nocturnal enuresis (urinates coming down the stairs) lend further support to this potential etiology of Regan’s “possession.”

**References:**

1. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/23/horror-films-inspired-by-real-life\\_n\\_4150442.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/23/horror-films-inspired-by-real-life_n_4150442.html)
2. Grof S, MD & Grof C, PhDc. Holotropic Breathwork, p 194-95.

**Key Words:** Washington, William Friedkin, Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist*, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Fr. Raymond Bishop, Ronald Doe, PANDAS, Grof, Holotropic Breathwork, demonic energy

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