Hypochondriasis  A somatoform disorder in which there is excessive concern that one's physical complaints are signs of underlying serious illness.

Secondary gain  Reward value of having a psychological or physical symptom, such as release from ordinary responsibilities.

People with hypochondriasis mistakenly believe that their minor physical complaints are signs of serious underlying illness. Though they may receive assurances from their doctors that their concerns are groundless, they believe the doctors are wrong or may have missed something. They may not realize how their anxiety about their symptoms contributes to their physical complaints—for example, by leading to sweating, dizziness, rapid heartbeat, and other signs of sympathetic nervous system arousal. Not surprisingly, they have more health worries and more psychological problems than do other people (Noyes et al., 1993).

Causes of Somatoform Disorders

To Freud, the hysterical symptom (loss of movement in a limb) is the outward sign of an unconscious dynamic struggle between opposing motives. On the one side are the sexual or aggressive impulses of the id seeking expression. On the other side are the forces of restraint, marshaled by the ego. The ego seeks to protect the self from the flood of anxiety that would occur if these unacceptable impulses were to become fully conscious. It employs defense mechanisms, especially repression, to keep these impulses buried in the unconscious. The leftover energy from these impulses becomes “strangulated,” or cut off from its source, and is then converted into physical symptoms like paralysis or blindness. One problem with Freud’s view, however, is that it doesn’t explain how conversion occurs—that is, how leftover sexual or aggressive energy becomes channeled into particular physical symptoms (Miller, 1987).

Freud also believed that the symptom itself both symbolizes the underlying struggle and serves an underlying purpose. For instance, hysterical paralysis of the arm serves the purpose of preventing the person from using the arm to act out an unacceptable sexual (e.g., masturbatory) or aggressive (e.g., murderous) impulse. The symptom has yet another function, called secondary gain. It can prevent the individual from having to confront stressful or conflict-laden situations. If Freud was correct in his belief that conversion symptoms serve hidden purposes, it may explain why many people with conversion appear strangely unconcerned or untroubled about their symptoms.