

**Family Medicine Forum 2018
Toronto, Ontario
November 14-17, 2018**

**Jon Davine, MD, CCFP, FRCP(C)
McMaster University**

SOMATIZING, A Brief Play

ACT I, SCENE I

Mr. Smith (the patient) describes a very atypical presentation of symptoms to the doctor. The doctor's somatizing antennae "go up".

Family MD: "Your pain (or symptoms) may be organically based or not. We will certainly look into that; however, Mr. Smith, you should be aware that emotional factors may also be playing a role here."

Mr. Smith: "What are you saying?? It's all in my head?? I'm imagining this?"

(Mr. Smith gets angry, shoulders tense)

Family MD: Not at all. I want to be very clear here. Every symptom you described today is very real. Nothing is imagined."

(patient relaxes)

"However, what we all know is that some very real symptoms can be caused by an altered emotional state. Consider tension headaches Mr. Smith. The pain is there, but is there a broken bone, or muscle, or tumour causing this?"

Mr. Smith: "No."

Family MD: "What causes tension headaches then Mr. Smith?"

Mr. Smith: "Tension. Stress."

Family MD: "Exactly right, Mr. Smith. Now, let's look at another sensation in another part of the body. You've heard of the expression "butterflies in the stomach?"

Mr. Smith: “Yes I have.”

Family MD: “Well, is there a broken bone, muscle or tumour that is causing this sensation?”

Mr. Smith: “No.”

Family MD: “What usually causes butterflies in the stomach then?”

Mr. Smith: “Emotional upset, stress, tension.”

Family MD: “Right again. So here we have several cases where the sensation is real but the emotional factors are the main factors behind it. This may be how we want to look at the symptoms you are presenting today.”

Mr. Smith: “Doctor, you are wonderful!”

ACT I, SCENE II

In this scenario, Mr. Smith describes symptoms consistent with chronic fatigue syndrome, or fibromyalgia, or irritable bowel syndrome.

Family MD: “Well, Mr. Smith, chronic fatigue (or fibromyalgia or irritable bowel syndrome) is an interesting phenomenon. This is certainly a somewhat controversial diagnosis. What you should certainly know, Mr. Smith, is that there never has been shown to be a biological cause for these symptoms. That isn't to say that we may not find one in the future. The other thing you should know Mr. Smith is that when, what are called psychological comorbidity studies are done with these entities, it shows that large amounts of psychological distress are linked to these entities. Therefore, perhaps, we should look at the psychologically stressful areas in your life and to see if we can help there. Let's assume that perhaps both psychological and organic factors play a role though. Whether it is 10%, 50% or 90% psychological, is perhaps not important. Let's simply say that to whatever extent these psychological factors are worsening the symptoms, let's try to help improve your psychological status and see where that takes you. What do you think about that, Mr. Smith?”

Mr. Smith: “You're wonderful, doctor!”

CURTAIN FALLS