

PROFILE

David Stendel's Adventures with Epilepsy

I had my first seizure in 1972. I was 9 and watching *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* at home in Manistee, MI. I remember the show looking different and a weird feeling in my diaphragm but no muscle spasms or pain.

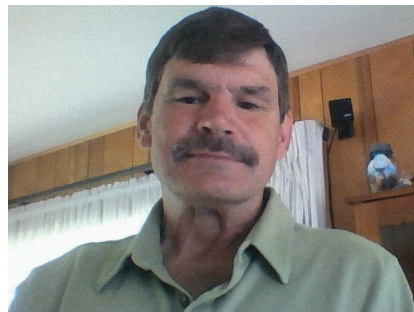
Soon after, I had my first grand mal seizure [also known as a generalized tonic-clonic seizure, which involves a loss of consciousness and violent muscle contractions] while perch fishing on Portage Lake in Onekama, MI. After wading into the water to catch crayfish for bait, I climbed a nearby boulder. As I rested there, I felt the same strange feeling, like a light shock, come over my diaphragm and I blacked out. A family friend dragged me out of the water, and my mom, who said I was frozen stiff, called 911. The paramedics arrived quickly and rushed me to the local hospital.

After a diagnosis of epilepsy, I made regular visits to the University of Michigan's department of neurology, where I would undergo brain imaging. From the scans, the doctors identified a lesion on my brain in the left temporal lobe, just behind my ear, which they believed may have been the cause of my seizures. Treatments were limited then, so my doctors prescribed phenobarbital, a barbiturate that affected

my memory and made me irritable and depressed.

In junior high school, when my seizures became more frequent, I would avoid public spaces and try to hide when I sensed a seizure, but that wasn't always possible. My classmates nicknamed me Spaz, which made me feel even more depressed.

Despite the ridicule and teasing from classmates, I survived both junior high and high school. Looking back, those experiences pale in



David Stendel and the cover of his book.

comparison with what I've survived as an adult. My epilepsy is much better controlled now thanks to carbamazepine (Tegretol) and lamotrigine (Lamictal), but I still have breakthrough seizures and usually at the most inconvenient times. For instance, I got the harebrained idea to shovel the roof of my house after a major snowfall. As luck would have it, I had a seizure while up there and accidentally walked off the edge and crashed to the ground. Fortunately, I only shattered my heel.

In the winter of 2010, after another major snowfall, I decided to go deer hunting. I soon spied fresh hoofprints in the snow and tracked them for about 40 yards. When no deer materialized, I hiked to a nearby tree stand about 20 feet aboveground to wait for them to reappear. Just as I was about to lock my safety harness, I had a seizure and fell 20 feet. I remember opening my eyes to the bright glare of sunlight as I lay on my back in the snow. As I struggled to my feet, I felt a sharp pain in my neck and shoulders. Slowly, I walked about 50 yards to the highway, where I sat until a guy stopped and called 911 on my cellphone. While we waited, two nurses who had just completed their hospital

by the accident. During my recovery in the hospital, I began writing an account of my deer hunting story. Since I was a child, I've loved writing stories, but my writing had a new purpose: to capture my life with epilepsy.

Three years later, I started writing for a local magazine and continued to contribute until it folded in 2016. Around that time, my editor encouraged me to write a book about surviving my seizures. With his support and funding from friends, I published *Just Call Me Spaz*—a book that chronicles the highs and lows of living with epilepsy—in 2018. I wrote the book hoping it would help others with this disease to set goals and never give up. [If your seizures are uncontrolled, talk to your neurologist about any restrictions around guns and hunting, driving, or working at heights or with dangerous machinery to ensure your safety.]

Since then, I've been invited to speak at a meeting of the Epilepsy Foundation of Michigan, and I did a signing at a local bookstore. In between fishing and goose and rabbit hunting (I gave up deer hunting after my tree stand accident.), I'm working on a novel loosely based on some of my life experiences. It's impossible to know when I'll have another seizure, but I fully believe it will be an adventure worth recounting. —As told to Paul Wynn

shift pulled over to help. They took my vitals and helped me remain conscious until the ambulance arrived.

At the hospital, X-rays revealed two broken vertebrae in my neck. The neurosurgeons who screwed my neck back together were amazed I wasn't paralyzed

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