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Mystery in space: Humans have never found proof of the existence of other intelligent beings in the universe, but tales of abduction by aliens in UFOs are surprisingly common.

Are extraterrestrials visiting Vidalia?

The town of Vidalia, Ga., may be known for its sweet onions, but it's fast earning a reputation as a center of UFO activity.

Between 9:50 p.m. Wednesday and 2 a.m. Thursday, more than 50 UFO sightings in and around Vidalia were reported to Ricky Monroe, section director for the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). Local radio station WVOP-AM (970) also logged numerous calls.

"I've never seen anything like this," WVOP program director Ed Johnson said of the reports of spaceships (some with aliens looking out), flying discs and streaks of

lights.

No one called the Vidalia police department about these apparent visitors from other worlds, although a police spokesman said they have received UFO reports in the past.

Christopher Early, the Georgia state director for MUFON, rates eastern Georgia as one of the world's top extraterrestrial sites.

"A lot of people think it's the minerals there in the earth," Mr. Early said. "UFOs like remote places, and it seems the minerals below the surface are what attracts them."

Ufologists say large numbers of

sightings also seem to center around Gulf Breeze, Fla., northern New Mexico, northwestern Arizona, northern Mexico and Egypt.

These sightings keep some academics busy, although not convinced. Dr. Richard Williamson, an astronomer at the Fernbank Science Center, has spent 21 years explaining lights in the Georgia night sky, most of which turn out to be weather balloons, airplanes, planets or shooting stars.

"I would prefer to think that if you know enough, you can identify anything," he said.

— Doug Cress

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UFOs

From OUTER SPACE or the INNER MIND?

By Doug Cress
STAFF WRITER

On Saturday morning, more than 100 mental health professionals are expected to file quickly and quietly into the Tara Hall conference room of the Sheraton Atlanta Airport Hotel. Some may joke nervously, but this is no laughing matter. Most are serious doctors who spent more than a decade in college to get where they are — three degrees do not come easily — and there's nothing funny about risking it all.

Simply stated, UFOs are bad for business. Faced with patients who tell tales of being abducted by aliens and intrigued by a recent Roper poll that indicates one in 50 Americans believes they've had a close encounter, it is the mental health professionals who are now asking for help.

Four "UFO experts" will hold "A Workshop on Unusual Personal Experiences" on Saturday, a very private, invitation-only conference that will teach therapists, psychologists and psychoanalysts from across the Southeast how to treat patients who claim they've been abducted by UFOs.

"For sure, there will be people there who will not accept the reality of this," said Budd Hopkins of New York, who has written two books about UFOs and is organizing the seminar along with Harvard University psychiatrist John Mack, Temple University history professor David Jacobs, and John Carpenter, a social worker from Springfield, Mo.

"But I also think it's safe to say that many mental health professionals are puzzled by it all," Mr. Hopkins continued. "What we hope to do is give these doctors information on the warning signs of UFO abductees and some information on how to treat them. These people have been through a terrible trauma, and we want to share what we know in terms of dealing with the situation."

Mental health professionals have heard UFO-abduction stories for decades, and usually have dismissed them as the result of either paranoia or repressed childhood traumas

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UFOs: Doctors at loss to treat victims of alleged abductions

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such as sexual abuse. Others are out-and-out hoaxes perpetrated by sick people seeking attention.

Either way, there's no denying the victims firmly believe something happened. Consider:

▶ Travis Walton, the Arizona logger whose alleged 1975 abduction inspired the recently released film "Fire in the Sky," was so traumatized that he spent the next 10 years living without a telephone just to avoid talking about it. Although Mr. Walton says he remembers only about 20 minutes of a five-day ordeal, he's told doctors he is too terrified to try to remember more.

▶ Ricky Monroe of Vidalia, Ga., claims he spent 3½ hours aboard a UFO last June after encountering an alien in his living room. Mr. Monroe says he was taken aboard a "scout ship" and toured two underground UFO bases nearby, and was told by the extraterrestrials that some 70 species of aliens were currently visiting the Earth.

▶ In 1973, shipyard worker Charles Hickson claims he was taken aboard a large, oval UFO at Pascagoula, Miss., and examined by a "roving-eye" type of machine. Although he has repeatedly been offered money for the rights to his story, Mr. Hickson has refused. "Making money is not what this experience is all about," he said.

▶ Debbie Tomey of Indiana claims she's been abducted repeatedly, first at the age of 6, when skin and blood samples were taken, and then again at 18, when she believes she was artificially inseminated. Several months later, Ms. Tomey, whose story was told last year in the CBS miniseries "Intruders," claims she was abducted yet again when aliens removed a fetus from her body.

Even before this new wave of attention generated by "Fire in the Sky," nearly 3 percent of all Americans reported they believe they have had a close encounter with extraterrestrials — many on more than one occasion.

And some therapists admit they are confused. Not for the record, of course. In fact, none of the 14 Atlanta-area mental health professionals contacted for this story wanted to be quoted — or even identified by name. One psychoanalyst simply hung up the phone when he heard the word "UFO."

Dr. Jacobs isn't surprised. After all, the American Psychiatric Association refuses to comment publicly on the subject, and the United States Air Force quietly closed its official investiga-



Universal Studios

The friendly E.T. of the movies is a far cry from the extraterrestrials reported by victims of alleged UFO abductions.

Info on UFOs

UFO information can be obtained by calling the following numbers:

- ▶ Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), Seguin, Texas, 512-379-9216
- ▶ MUFON Atlanta bureau, 261-4069
- ▶ Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), Chicago, 312-271-3611
- ▶ Robert Bigelow Foundation, Las Vegas, Nev. 702-456-1606

tion of UFOs (code name: Project Blue Book) in 1969.

"Hey, this is as far out as you can get, and academics do not take this kind of thing lightly," said Dr. Jacobs, an amateur ufologist who investigates abduction cases in his off-hours. "At Temple, I encounter resolute hostility. My colleagues think this is crazy and stupid and a complete waste of time."

Exactly, says Terence Sandbek, a clinical psychologist from Sacramento, Calif.

"There is zero evidence that any of this stuff is even remotely credible," Dr. Sandbek said in a telephone interview. "It's just damn silly, that's all. Since we know there's no intelligent life in this solar system, we can assume it would take literally hundreds of years to get here from another galaxy. That kind of travel is beyond our comprehension. And you expect me to believe extraterrestrials would come all that way just to pick up a drunken fisherman in Mississippi?"

"All this proves to me is that a Ph.D. is no guarantee against stupidity."

Meanwhile, Robert Baker, a

retired psychologist from the University of Kentucky, recently completed a paper titled "Alien Abduction or Human Production?" that debunks the UFO abduction theory and ascribes the patients' traumas to hallucinations called "waking dreams." "These experiences are frightening," Dr. Baker said. "They are scary and they are real, and many therapists may not know how to treat them properly. But they are not caused by UFOs."

The hardest hit, however, comes from Carl Sagan, the world-renowned scientist who dismissed the notion of alien abductions in a recent Parade magazine cover story titled, "Are They Coming for Us?" Noting that there is absolutely zero physical evidence to support the claims of UFO abductees, Dr. Sagan chalks up their experiences to hallucinations.

"If aliens are not partial to Americans, the number [of abductees] for the whole planet would be 100 million people," Dr. Sagan wrote. "This means an abduction every few seconds. It's surprising that more of the neighbors haven't notice. ... [Yet] no one would be happier than I would if we had real evidence of extraterrestrial life."

Predictably, Dr. Sagan's rejection of the UFO-abduction theory infuriates such true believers as Mr. Hopkins. "All of the [statistical] evidence indicates that this is an extraordinary phenomenon that demands extraordinary investigation," Mr. Hopkins said.

According to a Roper poll, which surveyed 5,947 adult Americans in late 1991, nearly 3 percent of those polled believe they have had at least one of four types of experiences consistent with a UFO abduction. Those experiences include seeing unusual lights or balls of light, having an hour or more pass without remembering what happened, waking up paralyzed with the sense of strange figures in the room, and finding strange scars on their bodies.

The figures were highest (18 percent) for waking up paralyzed with a stranger present.

Then again, one in 10 of those polled also reported having seen ghosts.

The results of the Roper poll — called the "Unusual Events Survey" — were mailed to nearly 100,000 mental health professionals last year, along with a preface by Harvard's Dr. Mack, a respected professor of psychia-

try who works at Cambridge Hospital.

The fact that more than 1,000 mental health professionals wrote back to ask for more information prompted Mr. Hopkins and company to stage Saturday's workshop, the third in a series that drew several hundred last year in Los Angeles and New York. Organizers say 150 people have signed up for the Atlanta session. The one-day, nine-hour seminar is free, and all costs are underwritten jointly by Mr. Hopkins's Intruder Foundation and the Bigelow Foundation, a UFO-friendly outfit set up by Las Vegas real-estate developer Robert Bigelow.

In the sessions, therapists are given tips on how to recognize the symptoms of a "UFO abductee" (panic attacks, an inability to sleep, missing blocks of time, etc.) and how to deal with the memories, which often include horrifying tales of sexual experiments performed aboard spaceships. In addition, techniques such as hypnosis and support groups are suggested which may help patients come to grips with their reactions, one that many professionals compare to the post-traumatic stress disorders suffered by veterans of the Vietnam War.

"What happened to these people is not good — it's bloodcurdling," said Dr. Jacobs. "One person I was helping re-live the experience through hypnosis just kept screaming in agony. It's frightening and depressing and a life-changing experience. You don't ever, ever go back to normal."

Each year, hundreds of bankers and teachers and athletes and garbage collectors and housewives and CEOs phone places such as the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) in Seguin, Texas, and the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) in Chicago to report UFO encounters.

According to MUFON international director Walter H. Andrus Jr., a disturbing pattern of repeat abductions has begun to appear, leading many ufologists to believe that human beings are being tagged and observed as part of a large-scale science experiment.

"We believe it's for breeding purposes," Mr. Andrus said. "For women, the abductions start around 3 or 4 years of age and go up through menopause; men usually start around 10. It looks like a genetic engineering experiment, which would explain the aliens' interest in our sperm and reproductive organs."

"Abductees say the aliens are small and frail and unable to reproduce like we do, and that they are used to produce half-breeds. They are using us to strengthen their race."