

Case Study: The Inner Subjective Experience of Mood Disorders

Objective: To explore the personal identity changes, overwhelming emotions, feelings of entrapment, and perception of the surrounding world in adolescents undergoing mood disorders, particularly depressive and manic episodes.

Description:

Experiencing a change in one's personal identity

Adolescents undergoing a depressive episode often describe a change in their experience of self, that they have difficulties to explain: "Like you don't feel yourself." This feeling ranges from a loss of confidence to a persistent and negative sense of lost identity.

The comparison between how they used to be and their current experience is extremely painful, affecting all areas of life, particularly their relationship with schoolmates and friends: "I used to be a really good friend, and now I'm not." Some of them feel that the good aspects of their identity have been replaced by unpleasant ones: "There is something wrong with me."

The weakened perception of the self may lead to a feeling of imminent personal failure: "I'm going to fail in everything." A sense of estrangement may be reported: "My depression is like being a different person... it's like it's part of my personality, but it's overshadowing who I am."

The manic episodes are instead marked by an experience of consolidation of personal identity and possibilities: "I felt like I could do everything, that I would still be the best at whatever I decided to do."

Experiencing overwhelmingly intense emotions

Adolescents often experience mood episodes as a chaos of intense emotions. During the depressive phases, they report feelings of mental pain and anger ("I find dark elements in my life: sadness, anger, desperation and pain"), which may be so intense that they feel like drowning: "With the depression spiral, you just keep going down and down." Sadness is described as being "to the deepest summit," often becoming an inconsolable "cry for no reason."

During the manic phases, the intensification of all emotions is often perceived as confusing: "I had so many thoughts and so many emotions in my mind; they all mixed together." Anger not rarely predominates over euphoria and enthusiasm: "My immense rage increased at the same time as my desire to break everything, to feel things fall." Anger and irritability may be experienced as an overflowing river "that has always been present."

As adolescents have not typically developed mature coping strategies to contain their overwhelming irritability, they may resort to verbal or physical aggression towards themselves or others (“I feel really angry, it’s just like little things that get me irritable... I’ll literally go mad... It’s like I shout at them or punch things or just say stuff I don’t even like really mean”) or bullying behaviors (“I was turning into a bully but didn’t want to turn into a bully”).

In severe depression, rather than experiencing an intensification of their emotions, adolescents may experience a profound numbness and inability to feel any emotion at all: “I didn’t really feel anything, like there was no happiness or excitement, but there was also no sadness. It was just like everything was grey.”

Feeling trapped in their own minds

Adolescents in a depressive episode often describe feeling trapped: “It is a disease that’s like a black hole. It is hard to get out of it, and everything around us is dark.” They may also report feeling “flooded” by recurrent negative thoughts, self-doubts and ongoing ruminations: “I’m thinking about more and more things, so it’s like piling on top, so, the mood just kind of keeps going down.”

During a manic episode, there may be an experience of unprecedented availability of the surrounding world, as if everything is easily achievable and within reach: “The world was my playground.” However, the sense of omnipotence is frequently chaotic and accompanied by racing thoughts and impulses: “You can tell that you were jumping from one thing to the next and not concluding sentences and things like that.”

Therefore, adolescents may eventually experience a painful sense of being trapped in their minds during both depressive and manic episodes. This feeling is amplified by an abnormal perception of the subjective time, which is stagnant in depression (“It feels like life goes on a loop every day, everything feels tired, nothing feels fresh anymore”), and accelerated in mania (“It was as if everything couldn’t stop running”).

Seeing the surrounding world fading away

During depressive episodes, adolescents may experience their surrounding world as fading away: “I’m separated from everyone else.” They usually do not share the entertainment of their peers, and this makes them feel alone and isolated: “Everything is just harder to get through, and you want to isolate yourself.” Isolation may become an unpleasant necessity: “I forget that everyone else exists... I’m invisible and I like that.”

The sense of isolation from the surrounding world may also be related to an altered perception of the lived body, which is characterized by heaviness, tiredness, and lack of energy: “I was always really tired, and I had no energy to do anything.”

During manic episodes, adolescents may report greater ease in social interaction (“I had always been shy but now I wasn’t anymore”). However, this sense of being more in tune with the surrounding world is only apparent and transitory. They are not able to pause and stop to

properly meet their schoolmates and friends, because thoughts and body are in continuous excessive movement.

Therefore, both in depression and mania, adolescents may ultimately experience the surrounding world fading away. Everything turns into a pointless and hopeless stagnation of personal purpose ("What is the point anymore? There is no point!") and boredom ("Just try and do a lot of different things, think I was interested in them then get bored, and just get into a cycle of boredom"), or into a senseless race without a goal ("I felt like I was in a video game").