

# **Case Study: The Experience of Adolescents with Mental Disorders in School**

## **Objective**

To explore and understand the multifaceted experiences of adolescents with mental disorders within the school environment and among their peers, highlighting their perceptions, challenges, and sources of support.

## **Description**

### **The Experience in the School and Among Peers**

#### **Perceiving the School as a Magnifier of Differences**

Adolescents with a mental disorder often perceive the school as a fundamental but precarious environment. When they compare themselves with schoolmates, they feel profoundly different: “[You] see other people... not being sort of freaked out and anxious or depressed whatever, you feel like ‘why can’t I be more like that?’”<sup>112</sup>.

Frequently, they feel forced to hide their true feelings from their peers: “I could not show it to anyone because I never talked to my friends about my feelings”<sup>53</sup>. This separates them from the surrounding social environment, leading to deep feelings of loneliness and incomprehension: “You feel quite alone when you’re growing up with things like that because there’s not really anyone who understands it”<sup>112</sup>.

The vitality and fun that normally characterize the school environment fade away, replaced by feelings of exclusion and defeat: “Because adolescents are supposed to have fun and hang out with friends at parties, but I kind of never feel like doing anything, and I wish I could enjoy things like before”<sup>90</sup>.

Negative relationships with teachers may further exacerbate the deep experience of loneliness and being different: “[Teachers] treat me like a cute cat. They treat us like we’re not human, like we’re less”<sup>74</sup>. Any teachers’ attempt to support the individual can also be experienced as a direct confirmation of their personal ineptitude compared to their peers: “We are different, that’s a fact, but they treat us like we’re different. Like we’re more different to other people than we actually are”<sup>74</sup>.

#### **Experiencing Bullying from Peers and Teachers**

Adolescents with a mental disorder frequently experience severe bullying<sup>113</sup>, which further compromises their self-confidence and interpersonal trust: “They took pleasure in hurting me, in seeing me suffer”<sup>114</sup>. Because of bullying experiences, they may feel profound shame and embarrassment while at school: “Me and a bunch of other kids had to go down at lunch to take [Ritalin], and it was kind of embarrassing... people saw me as the kid with ADHD, and they saw it as a bad thing”<sup>115</sup>.

The world of peers becomes a dangerous and unwelcoming place where they must be on guard: “I’m quite suspicious, at least more than before, always a little apprehensive about who people are, their personality, what they really think”<sup>114</sup>. The subjective experience of being bullied may be so dramatic that they may feel completely rejected, losing a sense of belonging (“I felt rejected. No one liked me; none of my teachers liked me”<sup>90</sup>) and eventually withdrawing from friendships and social interaction (“Afraid of my friends sharing what I tell them to other people”, personal communication).

At the same time, they still long for vital friendship and social belonging. To overcome this situation, they may resort to a passive acceptance of bullying: “I wouldn’t want to stop being friends with them because I don’t have any friends, so I kind of just suffered through it”<sup>115</sup>. Sometimes, the experience of being bullied is transformed into self-blame, to make sense of the inner confusion and hurt that is elicited by dysfunctional relationships: “I used to think it was my fault if I was mistreated by friends”<sup>104</sup>; “I didn’t really try to be friend with anyone because I didn’t trust myself to make good friends”<sup>115</sup>.

In other cases, adolescents with a mental disorder may suffer from their teachers’ lack of understanding (“It all comes down to lack of understanding. I felt like teachers did not know how to respond to people experiencing mental disorders”, personal communication), or even bullying (“One day he [teacher] just told me that I was going to fail and that I was a huge failure and I was never going to amount to anything... in front of the whole class”<sup>103</sup>).

### **Experiencing Peers as a Vital Support**

For many adolescents with a mental disorder, however, peers may represent an important and positive resource. Feeling accepted by friends is described as destigmatizing, allowing the individual to regain a sense of normality (“I told them, my close friends. They just said, ‘So what?’ and they just looked at it like a cold, not like a disease”<sup>116</sup>), and to dissipate feelings of shame and inadequacy (“They weren’t ashamed of it, so I started to not be ashamed of it either”<sup>116</sup>).

In particular, being with friends who share a mental disorder is perceived as extremely beneficial to overcome the social isolation<sup>117</sup> (“I’m not the only one going through this”, personal communication), communicate personal experiences (“My friends and I come together and speak about our experiences”, personal communication), freely express complex emotions (“We feel liberated; we get all our hatred out, all our anger, it feels good”<sup>114</sup>), and improve their self-esteem (“We share a lot of same feelings about things and I’m just able to really be myself”<sup>115</sup>).

Peers' understanding may also alleviate their subjective suffering: "When I feel that I am beginning to become anxious in school... then I can tell a friend, 'I do not feel okay at all right now'"<sup>104</sup>.