


Childhood Psychosis

Bipolar is the illness; I am not the illness, I merely have the illness. I am not helpless, I can always correct myself. I can fall down on the sidewalk, but I can pick myself up.

Taken from Zahava's Story, copyright Proctor & Gamble Ltd.

Psychosis can be defined as the presence of disruptions in thinking, accompanied by delusions or hallucinations, along with an alteration in thought processes. A clinical diagnosis is required. While incidents of psychosis amongst students are low, it is important to note that students experience the same range and types of psychotic symptoms as adults. Psychosis is a term that encapsulates different subgroups, the most common being schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. 

Warning signs for psychosis may include changes in sleep patterns, withdrawal from family, friends and other social activities, difficulty understanding what others are saying, reticence, hoarding objects or searching through other's belongings, wearing inappropriate combinations of clothes, diminished motivation, decreased ability to concentrate, erratic behaviour, paranoia and anxiety. (It is important to note that delusions and hallucinations are quite different to the vivid imagination that many young students have.)

Among students with schizophrenia internalising behaviours such as paranoia, anxious thoughts, and suspiciousness are reported to be more common than externalising acting out behaviours such as temper tantrums, aggression, opposition and hostility. In the student with bipolar disorder, delusions may be characterised by an excited energetic state. There will be increased energy and physical activity, and racing thoughts and speech that may be confused and irrational. Some students may have delusions whereby they think they have special powers. Alternatively, the student may become extremely withdrawn and inactive, possibly not moving or speaking for extended periods.

Most students with psychosis have been assessed as falling within the average range of IQ (Intelligence Quotient) on standardised IQ tests. Thus, if a student with a psychotic disorder is having problems with schoolwork, there might be a number of other possible reasons for this. There may be primary problems implicit in the disorder itself such as some form of learning difficulty. Problems may also stem from coping with delusions or hallucinations, paranoia, attention deficits and hyperactivity, social and emotional problems, low self-esteem, or side effects of medication.

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