

Unit 3 Case Studies

The Case of Danny: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Danny is a 13-year-old boy referred because of concerns noted by both his parents and teachers about some of his increasingly unusual behaviors. He has been an excellent student throughout his school years until this term, in eighth grade, when he began to fall behind in his classes. His parents also reported that he has dropped several favorite activities and become increasingly socially isolated. During the initial assessment, Danny took an unusually long time to complete some simple questionnaires. When asked about this, he admitted that he felt compelled to count the words in each sentence before reading it. He said that this has become a real problem because he can no longer complete his homework on time. Danny also described counting steps and feeling that he always needed to finish climbing stairs with his right foot. In fact, he has memorized the number of steps throughout his school, church, and home so that he always knows which foot to start with. If he does finish climbing stairs with his left foot, he feels compelled to go back down the stairs and start over.

Although he has never worried about germs before, he is now very concerned about them and has begun carrying a cloth with him so that he does not have to touch things like doorknobs or public telephones. He also finds himself washing and rewashing his hands as often as he can throughout the day. He also said that after he showers, he often still feels dirty and so immediately takes another shower. This has recently caused him to be late getting to school on many mornings.

The Case of Chloe: Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Chloe is a nine-year-old girl presenting with a high level of general distress. She was originally referred for evaluation because of concerns raised at school about some learning difficulties and problems related to extreme avoidance behavior. These problems included not talking in class, not turning things in, not going to her locker, and not interacting with other kids on the playground. For several months, Chloe has refused to ride the school bus, so her mother has driven her to school. Although Chloe has always liked sports, she will only play soccer and softball with her parents or her older brother, and only in their yard. Her parents have tried several times to encourage her participation on a team, but Chloe became so anxious and upset before games that she became nauseated and refused to get out of the car at the playing field.

Recently, Chloe has been unable to use public restrooms because she says that they scare her. After witnessing a classmate vomit in class on a hot spring day, she has become preoccupied with a fear that she will also vomit if she becomes too warm. Consequently, she has come to associate being hot with being nauseated and insists on always being in air-conditioned buildings during the summer.

Chloe has difficulty sleeping because of her tendency to ruminate. She describes this as being “unable to shut my brain off.” She also worries at night that she will be kidnapped. Chloe is interested in theater and would like to participate in school plays and summer community theater programs, but she says that she is too nervous to try out. When asked if she could change one thing about her life, Chloe says that she would most want to be able to be in a play. Chloe's mother describes her as “afraid of her own shadow.”

The Case of Zoey: Depressive Disorder

Zoey is 15 years old and in tenth grade. She has been a good student, though her grades have recently slipped from mostly Bs to mostly Cs. Zoey's guidance counselor met with her after noticing the drop in her grades and hearing that she had quit the school's speech team. Zoey had been an enthusiastic and successful member of the team for her first two years of high school. Her closest friends were on the speech team; after quitting, she has become increasingly withdrawn. After Zoey confided to the counselor that she was crying for no apparent reason and had lost interest in activities she used to enjoy, her counselor spoke to Zoey's parents and suggested that they schedule an appointment with a psychologist.

The psychologist met with Zoey and her parents, both individually and as a family. Her parents described her as an active, social, and fun-loving teenager who enjoyed everything about high school. In addition to speech, she was a member of a number of clubs and community service organizations. Although Zoey liked the activities themselves, it was the opportunity to be with the other kids that seemed to give her the most pleasure. Zoey's parents reported that she was not an especially gifted student, but she was conscientious and worked very hard. Teachers recognized and appreciated this, and Zoey was proud of her B average.

Looking back, her parents noted that things began to change the summer before tenth grade. They recalled that she began to sleep more and more and was much less active during the day. Although she had planned on finding a job at the local mall, she never actually applied anywhere. She seemed to prefer to stay home and watch TV in the evening, and she began to gain weight. At first, her friends called her often, but after Zoey repeatedly declined their invitations, they began to make plans without her. She appeared to regain some energy and enthusiasm when school started, but soon she did poorly on some quizzes and tests and fell behind in her schoolwork. For the first time, she began to complain that the work was too hard and often fell asleep when trying to do homework. When her parents asked if she was using drugs, Zoey became extremely angry and agitated. She accused her parents of never trusting her and always being critical.

When informed that her parents had talked about how well the first two years of high school had gone, Zoey seemed surprised and annoyed, saying that she had never liked school or most of the people there. She said she had participated in activities to make her parents happy, but that nothing she did was good enough, so she quit. She talked at length about a group of friends that she felt had turned against her, and also that she felt "different" from the other students. She said that she last remembered being happy "maybe when I was a kid in grade school."

Zoey told the psychologist that she had decided to ask for help because she had begun to experience repeated and intrusive thoughts about dying. She said that she did not have a plan for killing herself, but she was finding it increasingly difficult to manage these feelings of dread. She also said that she felt her guidance counselor was the only person she could really trust. She worried, however, that referring her to a psychologist was the counselor's way of getting rid of her.