

Unit 6 Case Study

The Case of Lara: Substance-Related Disorder

Lara is an 18-year-old senior attending an alternative high school for students who have struggled in traditional school environments. She began high school at a large, very competitive suburban high school. Both of her parents are successful professionals; her older brother was class valedictorian and currently attends a prestigious university.

Lara was not only a bright and engaging child, but also very strong-willed and stubborn. She began smoking cigarettes with her friends in seventh grade and was caught drinking with these same friends several times in eighth grade. Upset by these discoveries and Lara's insistence that nothing was wrong, Lara's parents sought mental health counseling several times (with individual sessions for Lara as well as family sessions), but a pattern emerged in which either Lara or her parents came to view the therapists as either unhelpful or incompetent. Multiple therapies were ended without much positive change.

By the time Lara started high school, she was smoking marijuana as well as drinking. By the end of ninth grade, however, many of her friends decreased their drug use as they became more involved in academics and cocurricular activities. Lara's drug use, in contrast, increased in both severity and variety. Although unaware of her escalating drug use, Lara's parents became increasingly concerned as her grades dropped and the school administrator contacted them about repeated truancy.

Lara was skipping school and driving to the apartment of friends who attended a local college. In addition to alcohol and marijuana, Lara was beginning to experiment with synthetic psychoactive drugs such as Ecstasy and prescription narcotics such as Oxycontin. Midway through her junior year, she was failing almost all her classes and her health was deteriorating. With the combined insistence of her parents and a therapist, Lara again began—but never completed—several outpatient drug treatments. Typically, she would initially cooperate, but she found staying sober physically and psychologically intolerable; she would quickly fall back into a pattern of drug and alcohol use. Late one night, returning from a dance club, Lara was driving erratically and had a minor accident. She had been drinking before going to the club and had later taken Ecstasy. The police were called; in addition to determining that she was driving while intoxicated, they found other drugs in her car and filed further charges. Lara agreed to enter an inpatient drug treatment program for adolescents. She started at the alternative high school when she was discharged. She likes the school, attends regularly, and feels understood and supported by the staff. Lara is actively attempting to avoid another relapse, but she acknowledges that it is extremely difficult because she still feels that “the only time I am really happy and alive is when I'm high.”