Managing chronic conditions in adolescence

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Adolescent Development

- Adolescence involves lots of changes!
- Progressing through normal adolescent milestones can become delayed or disrupted with chronic illness

What do we mean by ‘chronic illness’?

- Persistent medical symptoms
- Impact on daily functioning
  - School
  - Social
  - Adaptive
  - Family

The spectrum

Psychiatric/Conversion Medical/Organic

Cases

Psychiatric/Conversion

Tyler
- Pseudoseizures

Evan
- Fatigue
- Disorders and Nausea
- Headache

Stacey
- Crohn’s Disease

Medical/Organic
Case 1: Stacey
- History of low self-esteem
- Body image disturbance
- Restricted eating
- Anxiety
- Adjustment to chronic illness
- Perfectionism
- Crohn’s Disease
- Abdominal Pain
- Recent Weight Loss
- Family history of mental health difficulties (anxiety and depression)

Stacey
16 year old

Case 2: Evan
- Strong family medical history – Crohn’s Disease
- Glandular fever
- Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome
- History of learning difficulties
- Strong family history of anxiety
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Major Depression
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Dizziness and Nausea
- School absenteeism

Evan
14 year old

Case 3: Tyler
- Trauma history
- History of bullying experiences
- High levels of anxiety related to:
  - Health
  - Separation
  - School
- Pseudoseizures
- School Absenteeism
- Strong family history of mental health difficulties

Tyler
13 year old

Assessment
- HEADDSSSSSSSSSSSS
  - Medical
    - Medical History
    - Investigations to date
    - Physical assessment
    - Further investigations as needed OR Drawing a line
  - Psychosocial
    - Psychosocial History
    - Individual and Family

Formulation
- Drawing a line in medical investigations
- Validation of symptoms as real and distressing
- Move away from medically unexplained language
- BOTH/AND approach:
  - Explanation of symptoms that include both medical and psychosocial factors and their interaction
Formulation 1: What starts symptoms

Predisposing Factors:
- Temperament
- Negative early life experiences
- Learning difficulties
- Social difficulties
- Family medical and mental health history

Precipitating Factors:
- Physical illness or injury
- Life stressors

STRESS!!!
Physical AND Psychological

Symptoms:
For the resulting propagation of the nervous system and making of body signals
Symptoms themselves are a STRESSOR

Formulation 2: What keeps symptoms going:

Environmental Factors:
- Responses from schools
- Response from doctors

Individual Factors:
- Boom / bust patterns
- Lifestyle changes
- Sleep disturbance
- Hypervigilance to and attribution of symptoms
- Poor emotional awareness and regulation
- Anxiety and low mood

Family Factors:
- Unhelpful responses to symptoms
- Low distress tolerance
- Poor emotion language / uncontaining responses
- Family health focus
- Family achievement focus

Environmental Factors:
- Responses from schools
- Responses from doctors

Symptoms:
- Abdominal Pain
- Restricted eating
- Anxiety – persistent worried thoughts, sleep disturbance
- Fatigue
- Nausea and Dizziness
- Headache
- School absenteeism

Perpetuating/Maintaining
- Individual: OCD, depression, lifestyle changes, sleep disturbance, poor emotional awareness, illness beliefs
- Family: Health focus, unhelpful response to symptoms, low distress tolerance

Intervention

Individual
Symptom Management

Family

Environment
Physical interventions

- Medications
- Physiotherapy
- Exercise prescription
  - Graded activity and pacing
- Structured activity (OT)
- General health interventions
  - Conservative management (e.g. Salt/Fluids)
  - Sleep
  - Nutrition

Psychosocial Interventions

Different strategies from different approaches

Stacey
- Crohn’s Disease
- Individual
  - Psychoeducation
  - Adjustment to chronic illness
  - Cognitive strategies
- Family
  - Parent psychoeducation
  - Parent therapy inc. emotion coaching
- Environment
  - School – Enrolled in CHIPS program

Symptom Management

- Mindfulness for pain
- Relaxation interventions – breathing, visualization
- Hypnotherapy

Environment

- School – Education of teachers + adjustments and modifications

Evan
- Individual
  - Psychoeducation
  - Treatment of parental mental health
- Family
  - Parent psychoeducation
- Symptom Management
  - Mindfulness for pain
  - Relaxation interventions
- Environment
  - School adjustments and modifications

Tyler
- Individual
  - Psychoeducation
- Symptom Management
  - Sensory interventions
  - Distress tolerance strategies
- Environment
  - School adjustments and modifications including time-out
Challenges

• Shared understanding between services and teams
  - School, other teams (e.g. GP/medical), and families
• Shifting symptoms on the spectrum
• Acceptance and commitment to formulation
• Drawing the line
  - When? And How? Especially when new symptoms emerge
  - Finding the balance

Resources

• A great website for Pain education and interventions: https://www.aih.com.au/painbytes
• Mindfulness apps: http://mindfulbreak.com/ and https://www.headspace.com/
• Breathing apps: https://au.reachout.com/tools-and-apps/reachout-breathe
• Some other useful tools and apps: https://au.reachout.com/tools-and-apps