WHEN EATING DISORDERS REVEAL GENDER DYSPHORIA IN AN ADOLESCENT : A CASE REPORT

Hamza M., Ben Othman A., Askri W., Testouri F., Bourgou S., Charfi F., Belhadj A.
Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Department, Mongi Slim Hospital.

Copyright © 2017 Hamza M. et al.
Email: meriem_hamza@yahoo.com

Introduction:

Both gender dysphoria (GD) and anorexia nervosa (AN) are characterized by a distorted body image. Symptoms may overlap in both entities. The aim is to describe, throughout this clinical case, the co-occurrence of AN and GD and to discuss the particularities of AN in this context.

Case description:

MA, a female 17-year-old adolescent with a personal history of anxiety, has been followed-up since 2016 for a depression triggered by a disrupted family dynamic. During follow-up, MA presented dietary restriction, excessive physical activity with dysmorphophobia and calories monitoring linked with fear of weight gain, especially around the hips, resulting in a significant weight loss. The diagnosis of AN has been established.

Over time, a significant change in physical appearance and clothing preferences have been noted. MA started to dress more like a male and had a very short haircut. She has also admitted a deep desire to suppress her feminine traits and menstruations, and to obtain a muscular body and that her dietary restrictions were actually triggered by the intense and early feeling of gender incongruence.

The desire of a male body is represented by his drawing (Fig1 and Fig2)

Fig1
how do I see myself

Fig2
what I would like to be

Discussion:

This case describes a female teenager with symptoms typically seen in AN later revealing GD. Eating disorder (ED) may be the presenting symptom in some adolescents with GD, highlighting the benefit of addressing gender identity in young patients with ED[1]. The body dissatisfaction intertwined with the GD in itself may predispose to ED since people with GD strive for thinness in order to suppress features of their biological gender or accentuate features of their desired gender [2][3]. Weight loss may help to suppress the menstruation and may make the subjects look more masculine [4].

The weight gain shown in fig3 was associated with a gain in muscular mass and loss of fat.

Fig 3

This weight gain was, to our patient, a source of satisfaction as she was striving to get muscular, contrarily to what's expected of a girl with AN. GD and ED are characterized by a severe body uneasiness, which represents the core of distress in both conditions. In ED subjects body uneasiness is primarily linked to general psychopathology, whereas in GD such a relationship is lacking [5]. In the absence of timely, available GD management, gender nonconforming youth may turn to maladaptive behaviors to change their bodies, or self-harm the body that they perceive as a betrayal of their authentic gender [6][7][8][9] [10][11][12]

Conclusion :

Clinicians should investigate gender identity when confronted to ED symptoms. GD symptoms should be screened for during psychiatric assessments considering the different therapeutic strategies for both entities.

[1] Effects of Treating Gender Dysphoria and Anorexia Nervosa in a Transgender Adolescent: Lessons Learned, Sarah E. Strandjord, Henry Ng, MD, Ellen S. Rome, MD; [2] Hepp, U., & Milos, G. (2002). Gender identity disorder and eating disorders, International Journal of Eating Disorders, 32, 473–478; [3] Hepp, U., Milos, G., & Braun-Scharm, H. (2004). Gender identity disorder and anorexia nervosa in male monozygotic twins. International Journal of Eating Disorders, 35, 239–243; [4] S. Turan et al., Prolonged anorexia nervosa associated with female-to-male gender dysphoria: A case report; [5] Bandini E, et al., Gender identity disorder and eating disorders: Similarities and differences in terms of body uneasiness; [6] Connolly, M. D., Zervos, M. J., Barone, C. J., Johnson, C. C., & Joseph, C. L. M. (2016). The mental health of transgender youth: Advances in understanding. Journal of Adolescent Health, 59(5), 489–495; [7] Diemer, E. W., Grant, J. D., Munn-Chernoff, M. A., Patterson, D. A., & Duncan, A. E. (2015). Gender identity, sexual orientation, and eating-related pathology in a national sample of college students. Journal of Adolescent Health, 57(2), 144–149. [8] Guss, C. E., Williams, D. N., Reisner, S. L., Austin, S. B., & Katz-Wise, S. L. (2017). Disordered weight management behaviors, nonprescription steroid use, and weight perception in transgender youth. Journal of Adolescent Health, 60(1), 17–22; [9] Jones, B. A., Haycraft, E., Murjan, S., & Arcelus, J. (2016). Body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in trans people: A systematic review of literature. International Review of Psychiatry, 28(1), 81–94; [10] McClain, Z., & Peebles, R. (2016). Body image and eating disorders among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. Pediatric Clinics of North America, 63(6), 1079–1090; [11] Murray, S. B. (2017). Gender identity and eating disorders: The need to delineate novel pathways for eating disorder symptomatology. Journal of Adolescent Health, 60(1), 1–2; [12] Watson, R. J., Veale, J. F., & Saewyc, E. M. (2016). Disordered eating behaviors among transgender youth: Probability profiles from risk and protective factors. International Journal of Eating Disorders, 50(5), 515–522.