
I P H E R

Interprofessional Health Education and Research

A Child is Crying

Fifteen-year-old Cindy was brought to a mental health clinic by her father after he received a call from the counselor at school, who was concerned that Cindy was depressed and possibly suicidal. Her father had also been concerned about her because she had seemed sad and withdrawn for the past month.

The household consists of Cindy, her father, mother, and two younger siblings. According to Cindy, she has been depressed ever since she had a fight with her mother two years ago. During the fight her mother threw a pot of hot water and burned Cindy on the shoulder. She was taken to a nearby medical emergency room and treated for the burn. Since then, she stays out of her mother's way.

Cindy's mother has a long history of mental/emotional problems, with multiple hospitalizations and long-term outpatient treatment. She is reported by the father to be chronically "psychotic" and to have marked mood swings. There have been many conflicts in the marriage over the years, and the couple is now in the process of getting a divorce and selling their home. For the past two years, since the incident with the boiling water, Cindy's mother has occupied the third floor of their house and has had little contact with the family.

Before the incident with her mother, Cindy was very socially involved, taking dancing and music lessons and participating in both church and school activities. She is struggling in school.

Cindy says that her mood has been much worse in the last six months. She feels depressed almost every day, all day long. She worries about her mother and feels that the fight was probably her fault. She has lost interest in school and social activities, and has not really paid attention to her schoolwork for the last six months. Her grades have dropped. She is tired all the time and takes a nap when she comes home from school. At night she has trouble falling asleep, and in the morning often has trouble getting up.

In the past three weeks, Cindy has become anxious and has had two experiences in which she felt "spacey and unreal." She often hears the voice of a young child crying for help; but when she looks to see if there is someone outside the door, there is never anyone there. At times, recently, especially when she feels guilty about the fight with her mother, she is convinced she doesn't deserve to live, and has considered killing herself. Three weeks ago, while she was washing dishes, she thought about cutting her wrists with a knife; but the thought of how upset her father would be kept her from doing anything.

The psychiatrist who evaluated Cindy recommended an elective admission to the hospital. However, both she and her father felt that she would be able to follow through

with outpatient treatment. She was given the telephone number of the emergency room and the following day called to say that the voices were getting worse, and she was afraid she might hurt herself. She was directed to go immediately to the emergency room, and was subsequently admitted to the hospital.