

Is there a hormonal component to catatonia?

Dr. Ghaziuddin:

I'm very skeptical about exclusively explaining it on the basis of hormones. Almost all psychiatric illnesses—and this is so pervasive—there's a peak starting around puberty. Is it hormonal? Is it psychological? Puberty is a complicated process.

We know that there is an uptick in a range of psychiatric disorders, including depression, bipolar, psychosis, anorexia, everything. So I don't think that there is a distinct or an exclusive influence of puberty on the emergence of catatonia around puberty. I think it's a mistake. I think it's a distraction.

Very often, either the symptom might get ignored—this is all puberty—or there might be attempts to treat the illness with hormones, usually an oral contraceptive pill in females. So I think it's more important to recognize that puberty is a nonspecific event that's associated with all psychiatric disorders, and I think I can say that with confidence being a child psychiatrist. It may not be so apparent to say, an adult psychiatrist who's predominantly treating people in their 30s and 40s. It's difficult to go back and say, "What happened when you were 12 or 14 years old?" So I think that there is that one aspect.

I think of puberty as being another factor that's associated with mental illness. You may already know that one of the biggest factors associated with mental illnesses in general is poverty. It's maybe not a very good example, but I want to use this example and say poverty is not because you have less money in your bank, but maybe you're getting less quality care. Maybe your nutrition is compromised. Maybe you're going to a school where there are a lot of kids with behavior problems. Maybe you're going to a school where their classroom size is very large. So I think it's a nonspecific factor.

The other aspect of puberty that's important to keep in mind when we think about catatonia is that very often the symptoms have started prior to puberty. It's much easier to manage a little child in terms of their size. They start displaying impulsivity or uncontrollable hyperactivity—parents find it easier because you can pick up the child and you can just hold them and be able to soothe them. But as the child becomes a teenager, just by their sheer size, it becomes more difficult.

So I think that puberty is a factor, but I don't think it's a specific or a causative factor. And I think being distracted by puberty when you are considering somebody with catatonia is not entirely helpful. I think it's important to recognize it.