



Sara's Case — More than DD: How Sudden Loss can Contribute to Behavioral Concerns

Sara has a Developmental Disability (DD). She has engaged in profound self-injurious behavior (SIB) over the last quarter, which looks like banging her head against the wall until there is bruising and/or lesions that require medical care. Initially, staff thought this was a new symptom of Sara's DD due to communication frustrations. Looking into what's going on in Sara's environment, she recently lost a roommate due to that person moving to a new residential provider. This is a person with whom Sara was very close for several years. Before this, there had not been any signs of SIB from Sara. Sara stopped going to group activities that she previously enjoyed, stopped going to the local community center where she liked to build crafts, and spent most of her time in bed. Sara's behavioral consultant tracked her SIB to identify what might contribute to the behavior. However, results were difficult to pinpoint the function. Eventually, Sara was diagnosed with significant depression and complicated bereavement. An anti-depressant was prescribed, and environmental enrichment, including zoom calls with her old roommate, was started. Sara was taught to jump up and down in her room instead of engaging in SIB and began counseling to help with coping skills related to loss and sudden changes.



Sara's case exemplifies how behavioral problems can result from mental illness and life changes. Sara helped to remind the team that **people with DD are just like every other human that experiences loss and grief in their own way, and are just as vulnerable to life changes as everyone else.**

Recommendations for cases like Sara's are to provide in-service training in mental health and DD for support workers, including ways to regularly assess for and recognize environmental stressors and signs of mental health concerns.

This case example was taken and modified from Tang et al. (2008)'s publication, The other dual diagnosis: Developmental disability and mental health disorders.

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