CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF LUX LISBON

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in The Virgin Suicides

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Child Psychopathology

Abnormal behavior in children and adolescents is defined as not meeting the norms of society and parental expectations. They are distressing and create impairment in school performance and family and friend relationships. In the case of Lux Lisbon in *The Virgin Suicides,* her behavior was the most discussed throughout the movie. She was considered the “wild child” and displayed acts of risky sexual behaviors and moments of withdrawal. These behaviors deviate from the normal, even compared to her sisters, who seemed relatively stable after the loss of the youngest sister, Cecilia, from suicide. Unlike Lux’s sisters, the central girls we see in the movie, Lux’s behavior and influence on those around her to perform in questionable decisions with her show the atypicality of her behaviors. Ultimately, these decisions and behaviors became too distressing and ended in the loss of her and her sisters' lives.

Lux shows signs of bipolar disorder II due to the fluctuations of risky, elated behaviors to withdrawal and low energy moods. Because the movie was through the eyes of the neighborhood boys, the viewers weren’t able to gain a solid picture of everything the Lisbon girls were doing, saying, and behaving. Due to the discrepancy between what the boys were viewing and what may be occurring behind closed doors, it becomes challenging to conclude with certainty that bipolar is the best fit for Lux. However, although we may not see a lack of sleep or rapid speech, I believe the behavior of constant causal sex with a different boy each night for an unknown amount of time to the withdrawal of the activity shows the disbalance of her moods. It appears that, at times, Lux requires more sensation of pleasurable activities compared to her distance from those previous behaviors. And although the withdrawal from school and other friends was mainly due to the mother's lockdown of the girls rather than her own decisions, when viewing the risky behavior of drinking and smoking pot at the dance, even though her father was chaperoning, and the removal of those actions to a nonsocial attitude provides a decent amount of evidence that Lux Lisbon had bipolar disorder. In addition to the fluctuations of behaviors that we can hypothesize as a reflection of her mood, the suicidality at the end exhibits a chronic low mood that resulted in the end of her life. I am also unsure if that was their goal or if their plan to have the boys come over was their attempt at saving themselves and making a statement to their parents. If that was the case, I could see the plan forming in Lux’s mind as she was the one who allowed the boys in the house and told them to “help” before the incident. That would also show the recklessness of Lux’s decision-making and planning.

At the movie's beginning, the Lisbon family loses the youngest daughter/ sister. Cecilia had major depression, which was apparent through her discussions about animal extinction and her attempted and finalized suicide. This incident was the beginning of the severe stress and possible biological factors that may have contributed to the onset of Lux’s bipolar disorder. On top of Cecilia’s major depression, Mrs. Lisbon created a stressful environment for her daughters. Mrs. Lisbon may have some form of anxiety disorder which could stem from other familial mental illness that wasn’t mentioned in the movie. However, the controlling attitude toward the girls that took them out of school and away from friends or outside influence, even taking away Lux’s rock music, could have produced a hostile environment for the girls and Lux, who desperately wanted to be an individual.

Some risk factors may be the controlling household, where even Mr. Lisbon didn’t want to confront Mrs. Lisbon on specific issues. Also, the suicide of their sister created an incredibly stressful environment, especially when the newscaster continued to try to report their grief. Even when the arborists came to cut down the tree that Cecilia loved, and the sisters were protesting to stop them, the newscaster trumped their attempt by trying to film them. That lack of regard for their lives and feelings resulted in what I could imagine, the loss of their sister all over again. Another contributor to the onset of bipolar within Lux may have been the feeling of resentment or abandonment after Trip slept with her and left after the homecoming dance, which began the lockdown of the girls after Lux returned the following day.

Lux appeared to be the strong one. Sociable, enigmatic, and rebellious, Lux seemed to be the voice of the sisters. She had influence over them, although she was the second youngest. I believe if it wasn’t for the imprisonment of the girls in their home, Lux might have gained enough confidence to confront Mrs. Lisbon on her controlling tendencies. The relationship between the sisters was caring and reliable. They never seemed to fight and were nothing but supportive. Even when Lux decided to ignore curfew which caused them to be on house arrest, they never blamed or became angry with her. Their relationship would have kept them all sane if they had been able to leave the house. Unfortunately, their relationship was also extremely codependent, which is why they all decided to kill themselves.

As discussed previously, the idea of Mrs. Lisbon caging them in the house as a way to protect them from outside forces only made their depression and suicidality more extreme, not to mention that there is some evidence that when one person close to you commits suicide, it is likely that someone else in the family will as well. However, the lockdown almost forced the girls into a depressive state and desire to gain positive attention from anyone, including the neighborhood boys. At the beginning of the lockdown was also when Lux’s sexual behaviors began to skyrocket. Her mania and strive to rebel led to multiple boys sleeping with her on the roof of her house (another reckless behavior). The father, not confronting Mrs. Lisbon even after being questioned at work about where his daughters were, maintained Mrs. Lisbon's controlling behavior, which Lux was internally fighting against.

The recommendation for Lux’s treatment would be for her to be put on an anti-depressant along with an anti-anxiety medication. The reason for that combination and not putting her on the typical mood stabilizer is due to the fact that Lux has bipolar II, which is defined as episodes of hypomania and major depression, her fluctuations of mood did not appear to be extreme in the fact that she wasn’t experiencing any delusions or rapid speech. Along with medication, Lux should have found herself a therapist that uses family-focused therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychosocial interventions. Educating the parents on her disorder and how it may affect her and potentially the family would create a safer environment for Lux. Family-focused therapy would be beneficial to Lux’s recovery due to the application of enhancing communication and reducing familial stress and affective arousal for Lux and her parents. According to a recent study, “In a two-site randomized controlled trial (RCT) of adolescents with BD I and II, 9 months of FFT and best-practice pharmacotherapy were associated with more rapid and complete remission from depressive episodes over 2 years than brief psychoeducation and pharmacotherapy” (Miklowitz et al. 2013) An environment where she feels supported and not victimized would be crucial for her development.

The portrayal of bipolar II within the character of Lux was sensationalized by the main symptoms being promiscuity and suicidality. However, the character was through the eyes of the neighborhood boys who claimed that they loved the Lisbon sisters, which may have clouded their sight of the other side of Lux’s sexual behavior. This portrayal of bipolar II gives the unknown viewer the idea that if a girl has that disorder, then they will be sexually active while also on the verge of ending their life. This is not always the case for girls with bipolar II. The movie also sensationalized the girls in a way, being maidens in despair, needing the boys to come and save them. It promotes the idea of being pretty and mentally ill with being loved and desired. Society has been increasingly sensationalizing that idea for a while, which is problematic for young girls who have mental illnesses.

The end of the movie should have had a public service announcement giving the viewers numbers to suicide hotlines and information on the issue. As a person with depression but never suicidal, the movie gave viewers like myself different ways to end your life, which can be dangerous for those with suicidal tendencies. The public service announcement that should have followed the movie’s end should have read the following: Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the United States. Let us not add to the statistics. If you or anyone you know has feelings about ending their life, please call 988 or text HOME to 74174.

Citations

Miklowitz, D. J., Schneck, C. D., Singh, M. K., Taylor, D. O., George, E. L., Cosgrove, V. E., Howe, M. E., Dickinson, L. M., Garber, J., &amp; Chang, K. D. (2015). Early intervention for symptomatic youth at risk for bipolar disorder: A randomized trial of family-focused therapy. FOCUS, 13(1), 113–121. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.focus.130118