

Academic attainment linked with bipolar disorder

Teenagers who excel at school are four times more likely to go on to develop bipolar disorder in early adulthood than their peers who score average grades.

A team of researchers looked at the exam results of 713,876 16-year-olds in Sweden and then investigated which of the students went on to have a diagnosis of psychosis as they grew older.

They found that young people – and particularly young men – who had achieved A grades had the greatest risk of developing bipolar disorder between the ages of 17 and 31.

The researchers – from the Institute of Psychiatry and the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm – analysed information that had been collected in national registers in Sweden between 1988 and 2003. These include a national school register, which contains individual results for exams that all pupils sit when they are 16, and a national hospital discharge register, which has details of people admitted to hospital, and lists their diagnosis.

The research team first scrutinised the grades of young people who turned 16 between 1988 and 1997.

Lead researcher James MacCabe from the Institute of Psychiatry said: 'We found that achieving an A grade, particularly in humanities and to a less extent in science subjects, is associated with increased risk for bipolar disorder. A grades in Swedish and Music had particularly strong associations, supporting the literature that consistently finds associations between linguistic and musical creativity and bipolar disorder.' Students who scored an A grade in Sport, however, were not more likely to develop bipolar disorder.

Those students who scored the lowest grades were also more at risk – both boys and girls were twice as likely to subsequently develop bipolar disorder than students whose results were average.

James and his colleagues wonder if the same thinking styles and personality traits may be responsible for performance at school, and also predispose people to bipolar disorder.

During episodes of mania, people can be very creative and inventive, and also have extraordinary amounts of stamina and concentration. These traits could stand them in good stead when studying, revising and sitting exams. People with bipolar disorder who mostly experience episodes of depression may have thinking styles that impair their academic performance.

A separate analysis of the information collected showed that students who performed poorly at school were also more likely to develop schizophrenia in future years. Those students who scored high grades were much less likely to develop schizophrenia.

■ The results of the bipolar disorder analysis were published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in February 2010 in a paper called *Excellent school performance at age 16 and risk of adult bipolar disorder: national cohort study* (James MacCabe et al, *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2010), 196, 109-115).

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