

Managing Moods without Meds

Phyllis Bronson Helps Angry Boys & Sullen Girls



By Jennifer Davoren
Aspen Times Staff Writer

They sulk, they pout and, on occasion, lash out.

The actions of some teenagers can bewilder parents, at least those who can't recall their own adolescent misery. And though the dilemma of dealing with a "moody" teen isn't a new one, some seem to think the situation has intensified.

"Parents keep asking me if teens are getting worse--and they are," said local scientist Phyllis Bronson.

Bronson knows a little something about mood swings--and, thanks to her doctorate in neurobiochemistry, the biological basis for them. Bronson, with the help of Aspen physician Dr. Kenton Bruce, recently completed a four-year study on the mood biochemistry of aging women--namely, how hormones affect the female brain.

This study of the "brain-body connection" resulted in attention from Aspen's health-conscious populace. Bronson and Bruce presented two sold-out lectures on the subject at the Given Institute last year, helping standing-room-only crowds of women with their midlife mood shifts.

Bronson's progress with women was so well-received that she decided to try her hand at another troubled group: teenagers.

"I don't see men, because they think they don't have moods," Bronson laughed.

"When we were finishing the women's mood study, Bronson continued, we got so many calls from around the country asking for help for kids. so I started seeing the occasional child. I was encouraged to start doing more."

Bronson's involvement led to her latest study--one she's titled "Moody, Sullen Girls and Angry, Hostile Boys" in honor of her subjects. Bronson has presented preliminary findings from this study at scientific conferences such as the American Academy of Environmental Medicine's latest gathering. Bronson's planned four-year study on teenage moods--and, of course, the biochemical basis for them--could eventually translate to happier kids and healthier families.

Challenging Prozac

About 5 million American children will wake up this morning and pop some sort of mood-altering pill.

"Isn't that scary?" Bronson asked with a shake of her head.

Bronson has never been big on psychiatric drugs. She cofounded the Aspen Clinic for Preventive and Environmental Medicine with Aspen physician Dr. Harold Whitcomb in 1983 and, after Whitcomb's recent retirement, the business was reincarnated as Biochemical Consulting.

That's biochemical rather than pharmaceutical.

Bronson's tactics with the "Sullen Girls/Hostile Boys" study involves the regulation of neurochemicals. When Bronson brings a child into her study, she first analyzes their brain chemistry.

Bronson uses a series of amino acid and fatty acid supplements that affect the child's neurochemistry--basically boosting different areas of brain development. That way, Bronson can track and affect the brain patterns that cause anxiety, depression, even mild forms of rage.

"We use pharmaceutical-grade amino acids that are synthesized in a laboratory," Bronson said. "They come in pills, they come in powders."

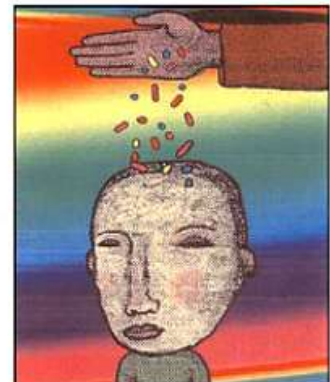
These amino and fatty acid supplements also help isolate necessary nutrients, Bronson said.

They're essentially the building blocks of protein molecules, but they all compete with each other when they're in food," she said. "When you isolate them, they target certain areas in the brain."

And the deficiency of certain nutrients, or an overabundance of certain hormones, is corrected. For example, Bronson has determined that the mood patterns of her "sullen girls" can come from a dominance of estrogen. This, she says, makes many girls irritable.

"I make up formulas based on my research to the right ratios, and a child drinks those in a shake for six months and the chemistry corrects itself," Bronson said. "We also look at vitamins and minerals, but they're secondary to the amino acids."

Though the idea of adjusting brain chemistry might seem drastic to the uninitiated, Bronson promises that the procedure is gradual and changes are subtle.



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Phyllis J. Bronson, Ph. D.

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