

Faculty Guide **MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITIES**

OVERVIEW AND DEFINITION

While a single symptom or isolated event is rarely a sign of mental illness, a symptom that occurs frequently, lasts for several weeks or becomes a general pattern of an individual's behavior may indicate the onset of a more serious mental health problem that requires treatment. Some of the more significant indicators of a possible mental illness include:

- marked personality change over time
- confused thinking, grandiose ideas
- prolonged feelings of depression or apathy
- feelings of extreme highs or lows
- heightened anxieties, fears of anger or suspicion; blaming others
- social withdrawal, increased self-centeredness
- denial of obvious problems and strong resistance to offers of help
- substance abuse
- thinking or talking about suicide

Students who request accommodations because of a mental health disability are participating in some form of treatment intervention, either medication therapy or psychotherapy, or a combination. It is the responsibility of the disability support office in your college to work in collaboration with mental health professionals in hospitals and community agencies to ensure that students with mental health disabilities are capable of sustaining normal academic stress. As faculty, providing a supportive learning environment and working closely with the disability support services in your college will be key factors to the success of students with mental health disabilities.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Disorder	Educational Implications
Adjustment disorders: develop in response to a particular stressor and complete recovery is anticipated to occur within a 6 month period	Loss of initiative to attend class, complete homework assignments; when accompanied with depression or anxiety may impact learning temporarily in ways similar to anxiety and depressive disorders do (see below); inappropriate interactions with others (i.e. may be belligerent)
Anxiety disorders: disorders in which the major feature is anxiety. <i>Types include panic disorders, agoraphobia, specific phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder</i>	Student may be afraid/anxious of school related activities such that he/she fails to attend class, or keep scheduled appointments; high anxiety can paralyze the ability to think and act; student may respond physically such as becoming ill or highly agitated; high anxiety can cause physical responses that inhibit learning - the material is not absorbed and/or the material is not recalled; when anxiety is high, the student is more likely to respond with anger and aggressiveness or to withdraw; the student with high anxiety is more susceptible to the consequences of fatigue than the average student.

<p>Mood disorders: can be acute, severe, and of relatively short duration, or chronic conditions. <i>The types include major depressive disorder, dysthymic disorder, Bipolar disorder, cyclothymic disorder and substance induced mood disorder.</i></p>	<p>Lack of energy or desire to perform; not able to think or act quickly; sadness or mania makes others uncomfortable; many symptoms cause physical discomfort, such as lack of appetite leading to poor eating/self care; lowered self esteem, resulting in negativism; side affects of medication can include blurred vision, concentration difficulties, drowsiness and restlessness.</p>
<p>Personality disorders: are characterized by a pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, starts in adolescence or early childhood, is stable over time and leads to distress or impairment. <i>Types include paranoid, schizoid, schizotypal, antisocial, borderline, narcissistic, avoidant, dependent & obsessive-compulsive personality disorders.</i></p>	<p>Difficulties with relationships; others become frustrated with them; often "punished" without knowing why; difficulty trusting people so they may be manipulative, blame others, seem to be trying to retreat; a crisis is often occurring in the life of an individual with a personality disorder.</p> <p><i>(All of this makes it difficult to accept help that is available to them through modifications/ accommodations.)</i></p>
<p>Eating Disorders: characterized by anxieties about weight gain. There can be long-term, irreversible consequences which can affect one's physical and emotional health. <i>Types include anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa</i></p>	<p>Absences from school for treatment of health problems because of eating habits; side effects of malnutrition such as lethargy, forgetfulness, poor judgement.</p>

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

In addition to the following general instructional strategies it is prudent for faculty to watch for any significant change in a student's work habits, behaviours, performance and attendance such as: frequent absences; low morale; disorganization in completing school work; lack of cooperation or a general inability to communicate with others; frequent complaints or evidence of fatigue; problems concentrating, or making decisions, or remembering things; missed deadlines, poor exam grades; decreased interest or involvement in class topics or academics in general.

People who experience problems such as those above may simply be having a bad day or week, or may be working through a difficult time in their lives. A pattern that continues for a long period may, however, indicate an underlying mental health problem and they should be referred to the disability support office or counselling services.

Aggressive, hostile behaviour is NOT acceptable and should be dealt with in the same manner with which faculty deal with other students (ie. ask the person to leave or apply the rules of conduct code). * **Note that**

non-threatening delusional behaviour should not be confronted by faculty. Acknowledgement is advised, using words such as, “I hear what you say, but that is not my view”.

- provide explicit guidelines for assignments
- minimize distractions in the learning environment
- pre-arrange a cue to refocus attention
- deal immediately with any negative behaviour by peers towards the student
- permit students to leave the classroom if anxiety becomes unmanageable
- provide copies of your notes to cover emergency absences
- be prepared to meet with student and disability support office for contingency planning
- identify any changes in routine well ahead of time
- recognize small achievements
- refer students to counselling or disability support services if you are concerned about their mental health

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Students with disabilities are expected to accomplish the “core competencies” of their programs. To achieve this, accommodations are provided to minimize or eliminate any disadvantage their disability presents. Accommodations are unique to each individual. The disability support office in your college makes these recommendations based on confidential documentation that the student provides to the college. Some of the most commonly provided academic accommodations to students with mental health disabilities include:

- adjusted course grades for medical reasons (ie. no penalty for late withdrawals)
- separate testing room
- provision of extended time for tests and exams. The amount of extra time is determined by the disability support office.
- use of memory aids such as formula cards during tests
- alternative evaluation procedures
- priority scheduling of classes (ie. time of day and sequence of courses in a program)
- provision of a notetaker for lectures
- reduced course load
- allowance of break periods as needed for rest and taking medication
- access to onsite emergency psychological support and referral service

RESOURCES

The disability support office in your college will have brochures, books and videos available for loan as well as information about local resources.

Canadian Mental Health Association
2160 Yonge St., 3rd floor,
Toronto, ON, M4S 2Z3
Tel: (416) 484-7750
Fax: (416) 484-4617
Website: www.cmha.ca

This document is a compilation of resources from CCDI member colleges.