

Working with Students with Psychological Disabilities

Last updated March 12, 2015

Understanding psychological disabilities

Psychological disabilities, or mental disorders, can include a broad array of mental illnesses or impairments that affect people of all ages. The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) defines a mental disorder as a “syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the [...] processes underlying mental functioning,” and notes that “[m]ental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities.”

Examples of mental disorders that might affect college students include, but are not limited to: attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and stress disorders, schizophrenia, major depression, Tourette syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and bipolar illness.

The limitations of a psychological disability or mental disorder might not be intellectual in nature, but the disability often impacts one’s academic achievement. The disability might have a biochemical, psychological, or environmental origin. Most symptoms are treatable with medication and/or psychotherapy, however the negative stigma associated with mental illness might cause a student to be reluctant to disclose his or her disability and get the necessary accommodations.

Ways of helping students who have psychological disabilities:

- You will not know if one of your students has a psychological disability unless the student voluntarily discloses that information to you. In order to maintain confidentiality, you will only be told that a

particular student has a “documented disability that requires specific accommodations.”

- Students with psychological disabilities vary in the amount of academic support they need. Because the disability is hidden, accommodations can sometimes appear to provide an unfair advantage. A helpful approach is to ask oneself, “How would I feel about providing the accommodation if this person had a visible physical disability?”
- Uneven distribution of the academic workload can exacerbate the symptoms of many psychological disorders. It is important that instructors communicate clearly about the deadlines or due-dates of the required work. It is easier for students to balance their health needs with their class work, and manage their time if they can trust the syllabus. It is especially important for students with certain psychological disorders to be forewarned of any changes in requirements.
- Many students are on medications that have side effects (such as drowsiness) that limit their ability to study. Some students need a certain number of hours of sleep per day to manage their disability. You might be asked by the Director of Academic Resources to allow extensions in certain situations.
- On rare occasions, a student may exhibit inappropriate or disruptive behavior. It is important to hold the student to the same standard of conduct as other students whether or not they have been identified as having a disability.
- If you are concerned about a student’s behavior and suspect that he or she is experiencing symptoms of mental illness and needs help, please contact Donna Cummins, Assistant to the Dean of Students, who will ensure that the appropriate staff is contacted immediately.

