Lesson 10: Psychiatric Disabilities

PURPOSE

The purpose of this lesson is to increase your awareness of the issues and strategies related specifically to accommodating students with Psychiatric Disabilities/Mental Health Disabilities.

By reflecting on your own course while reading the Lesson Content, you will be guided to consider possible modifications to your course specifically related to psychiatric disabilities. By considering and discussing the access issues in a case study reading, you will develop an awareness of additional strategies and accommodations.

Questions to REFLECT on while reading the CONTENT

What challenges might students with psychiatric/mental health disabilities face in your selected course? What accommodations might they require?

CONTENT

We are now concentrating on accommodations for students with specific disabilities or impairments. This lesson presents issues and suggestions for accommodating students with psychiatric/mental health disabilities.

Psychiatric or mental health disabilities vary widely; they range from mild depression to chronic disorders such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Negative stereotypes and the fact that these disabilities are typically "invisible" further complicate the provision of appropriate accommodations for students with these disorders.

Students with mental health or psychiatric disabilities can be affected in several ways. They may be more susceptible to the common stressors of college life involving academic demands as well as interpersonal relationships and living alone or away from home for the first time. Students may have particular problems receiving, processing, and recalling information during times of stress.

Side effects from medication may also impact attention, memory, alertness, and activity level. The episodic and unpredictable onset and recurrence of illness can also interrupt the educational process. Individuals with psychiatric disabilities may be treated with a combination of medication, counseling, and behavioral therapy. Often, there are a variety of mental health support services available on campus. A student with a psychiatric impairment may need to build time into his/her schedule for therapy and/or supportive services.
Examples of accommodations for students who have mental health impairments include:

- Note-takers, use of computer for note taking
- Audiotaped class sessions
- Early notification of projects, exams, and assignments to reduce stress
- Flexible attendance requirements
- An encouraging, validating, academic environment
- Alternative testing arrangements in a quiet room
- Extended test-taking time
- Assignments available in electronic format
- Web page or electronic mail distribution of course materials and lecture notes.

Additional specific accommodations in SCIENCE LABS include:

- Allow for extended set-up, process, and practice time
- Use a combination of written, oral, and pictorial instructions
- Demonstrate and role model procedures
- Allow for frequent short breaks
- Provide preferential seating - particularly near the door
- Decrease extraneous distracting stimuli in the classroom and lab
- Allow student to bring a water bottle to lab.

**SUMMARY**

The broad range of psychiatric or mental health disabilities and the "invisible" nature of the disabilities complicate making accommodations for students with the various psychiatric or mental health conditions. They may have difficulty attending class regularly; they may fatigue easily or have difficulty taking notes. Medication side effects may impact endurance, memory, and attention. Students may have particular problems receiving, processing, and recalling information during times of stress.

Always remember that disability-related information is confidential. The student is your best resource for determining what accommodations are appropriate. Flexibility and effective communication between you, the student, and the Office of Disability Support Services are key in approaching accommodations.

**POSSIBLE DISCUSSION**

While reading the content, you considered ways in which your selected course might accommodate a student with psychiatric disabilities. What accommodation strategies might you use in relation to the student described in the paragraph below?

"I don't know if one of my student’s has a mental illness, but he exhibits extreme anxiety and may "freeze up" during tests, cry or faint while giving presentations, and occasionally react to a
situation with an angry outburst. How can I be most supportive without lowering academic expectations?"

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Read answers to frequently asked questions, explore case studies or access additional resources regarding working with students with Psychiatric/Mental Health Disabilities
- Learn more at UCO’s Disability Support Services website
- Learn more at UCO’s DSS Handbook for Faculty & Staff
- View resources for helping instructors accommodate students with disabilities in specific academic activities

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