

# Focus on Disability Awareness

An Occasional Bulletin from the Office of Disability Services for LVC Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

## College Students with Psychiatric Disorders

Most colleges and universities are seeing an increase in the number of students with psychiatric disorders. Such disorders are considered to be disabilities under the ADA of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Thus, students with psychiatric conditions are entitled to reasonable accommodations in the classroom. Students' rights to privacy and confidentiality about their disability are protected under the aforementioned statutes; therefore, specific information regarding a student's psychiatric history, diagnosis, and medications will usually not be revealed to instructors. However, it is important that instructors understand the specific barriers that the disorder presents to learning and demonstrating knowledge. The Office of Disability Services will provide instructors with information about what behaviors to expect as a result of the disorder or use of psychotropic medication, how these behaviors interfere with the student's participation and performance in class, and what useful strategies or academic adjustments may help the student perform up to his or her academic potential.

Attitudinal barriers to working with students with psychiatric disabilities are usually based upon misconceptions about mental illness. Having a psychiatric disorder does not necessarily mean that an individual is psychotic (disoriented to reality) or likely to become disruptive or violent. Even if the disorder does predispose the student to episodes of aggressive behavior, the presence of that disorder does not excuse the student from adhering to an established student code of conduct. Having a psychiatric disorder does not necessarily prevent one from being able to meet the cognitive demands of a college program. Finally, educators' or administrators' fears that if the college is known to effectively serve students with psychiatric disabilities it will be overrun with students with mental illness are unfounded.

Students with psychiatric disabilities may suffer from a variety of functional limitations due to their disorder, such as difficulty in:

- **Screening out environmental stimuli** - difficulty in blocking out sounds, sights, or odors that interfere with focusing on tasks. For example, a student may not be able to attend to a lecture while sitting near an air-conditioning unit, or may not be able to study in an area in which people move about. *Possible solutions: Have student sit as far away from the air-conditioning unit as possible, or cool the room prior to class and then shut off the unit during the lecture; arrange for the student to have access to an individual study room in the library on a consistent basis.*
- **Sustaining concentration** - the student may appear to be restless, easily distractible, may have difficulty remembering verbal directions, may be quite inconsistent in his or her ability to stay focused over extended periods of time. *Possible solutions: Break large projects into smaller tasks, or lengthy exams into several shorter exams to be given on consecutive days; allow brief but frequent breaks to stretch, walk around, etc., refer student to a tutor to help with study skills and information retention, write out instructions on board, in syllabi, or on handouts.*

- **Maintaining stamina** - having energy to attend a whole day of classes, combating drowsiness due to medications. *Possible solutions: Encourage part-time enrollment or minimal full-time course load (12 hours); schedule classes for times of day that student is most alert.*
- **Handling time pressures and multiple tasks** - managing assignments, meeting deadlines, prioritizing tasks. *Possible solutions: Help student break larger assignments and projects down into manageable components, perhaps assigning due dates for each step; distribute a course syllabus of assignments and due dates for the entire semester to help student plan and prioritize workload; encourage use of a weekly/monthly calendar to track due dates.*
- **Interacting with others** - getting along, fitting in, reading social cues accurately, engaging in appropriate social discourse with others. *Possible solutions: The student may benefit from establishing a mentor relationship with an older student, who can introduce him or her to others, show the student "the ropes." This can be arranged through the Office of Disability Services. The student may need therapeutic counseling to improve social skills. It is helpful to refrain from automatically assuming that interpersonal peculiarities that cause you discomfort are intentional behaviors.*
- **Responding to negative feedback** - understanding and interpreting criticism or poor grades, difficulty knowing what to do to improve, or how to initiate change. *Possible solutions: Use a feedback loop, asking the student's perspective of his or her performance, what the student believes are his or her strengths and weaknesses, sharing your insight into the student's strengths and weaknesses, and suggesting specific ways to improve. Give student a chance to read written feedback privately, and then discuss; make alternative assignments or "extra-credit" options available to all students, thus giving them a way to make up for a poor grade; if necessary, arrange for a three-way meeting with the student and the disability services office to facilitate communication.*
- **Responding to change** - coping with unexpected changes in coursework, such as changes in assignments or exam dates, or changes in instructors. *Possible solutions: Prepare students when possible for changes that will be happening, explain any new course requirements, make a special effort to introduce any new instructors and orient the new instructor to the student's needs.*

#### **Types of Potential Accommodations:**

- Preferential seating in class
- Peer notetaker
- Beverages permitted in class (to alleviate dry mouth or tiredness caused by medications)
- Pre-arranged breaks
- Permission to audiotape lectures
- Extended time on exams and assignments
- Segmented exams (dividing an exam into parts and allowing student to take them in two or three sessions over 1 to 2 days)
- Permit exams to be individually proctored, including in hospital
- Increase frequency of exams (gives student more opportunities to demonstrate knowledge - creates less pressure than having just a midterm and a final)
- Permit exams to be read orally, dictated, or typed
- Reduced academic courseload
- Priority registration (accommodates for effects of medication on alertness at certain times of day, may prevent back-to-back scheduling of classes)
- Incompletes rather than withdrawals or failures if relapse occurs

**Case Scenarios:**

*Joe, a student with a documented psychiatric disability, is one of twenty students in your class. He takes a medication that causes him to have akathisia (extreme restlessness) as a side effect. He says he needs to get out of his chair and pace every fifteen minutes or so, to relieve his agitation. Is this reasonable?*

The rights of other students cannot be violated in order to protect the rights of a student with a disability. Joe will need to negotiate with his instructor to find a way to participate that does not interfere with the other students' ability to learn in class. Perhaps the room can be arranged so that there is ample space behind the last row of desks for him to pace quietly. Perhaps he needs to be allowed to periodically leave the room to pace, or be allowed to audiotape the lecture if he cannot remain seated in class for the entire hour. The law requires that students with disabilities be able to meet the essential requirements of the role; if attendance is essential, Joe may not be able to fulfill the requirements of the student role.

*Marie is enrolled in your introductory biology class. Although she is medicated, her schizophrenia causes her to have difficulty sustaining focused attention during lectures. When she becomes aware that her mind has wandered, she becomes highly anxious at having missed important information, and she constantly interrupts you to ask questions or have you repeat yourself. She does not seem to respond to nonverbal cues to limit her interruptions, and it has become increasingly difficult to cover all the material you need to cover. You wonder if you must tolerate her intrusive behavior on account of her psychiatric disability.*

Marie should be asked to speak with you privately in your office, where you can share your concern about her too-frequent interruptions during the lecture. Perhaps a solution to the problem would be to ask the Office of Disability Services to provide her with a tape recorder to tape the lecture; the use of one with a counter would allow her to simply record the number in her notebook whenever she becomes aware that she has stopped paying attention, and refer directly to that part of the tape after class. Another solution might be to schedule a short office visit each week, when Marie could come prepared with specific questions or requests for clarification. The fact that Marie has a psychiatric disability should not prevent you from working collaboratively with her to correct the problematic situation; one that, again, intrudes on other students' ability to learn.

*You have assigned a project with an oral presentation component to your History class. Jean, one of your students, lingers after class to inform you that she has a generalized anxiety disorder that makes it very difficult to speak in front of groups; indeed, you note that she has never raised her hand or participated in group discussions in your class. She inquires about the possibility of modifying the assignment to allow her to do a written presentation instead. Should you allow this?*

Assuming this is the first you have been made aware that the student has a psychiatric disorder, ask her if she has presented documentation of her disorder to the Office of Disability Services. If she has, she will be provided with a letter of verification of her disability, in which appropriate accommodations or modifications are described. If you believe and can provide a rationale as to why an oral presentation of the project is an essential requirement of your course, you will not have to allow the modification, although there may still be a way to compromise - perhaps Jean could prepare a videotape of her presentation that could be shown to the class. If the oral presentation of the material is not an essential requirement but the other students need the information she was to present, perhaps the assignment could be modified to include the preparation of handouts for the class as well as a written report for you.

