

Psychiatric Disabilities

Psychiatric disabilities cover a wide range of conditions, including eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, and other psychiatric conditions. Psychiatric disabilities are very common. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that as many as 1 in 4 adults in the United States will suffer from a diagnosable psychiatric condition in any given year. Being in a college environment can be helpful to students with psychiatric disabilities as it often provides a structure and routine that aids students in the recovery process. Many psychological conditions are treated using a combination of medication, therapy, and support. Because of the social stigma that often accompanies psychiatric disabilities, students may be reluctant to disclose their needs for accommodations.

Some of the causes of psychiatric disabilities are trauma, biochemical imbalances, differences in brain structure, highly stressful life experiences, and other genetic, biological, and social factors. While it likely takes a combination of several of these factors to produce a serious psychological disability, researchers are still working to discover specific causes of these conditions.

The disorders most commonly experienced by students at Southern include:

- Anxiety / Panic Disorders
- Depressive Disorders
- Eating Disorders
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders
- Personality Disorders
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorders
- Schizophrenia and Schizoaffective Disorder
- Substance Abuse

Common Psychiatric Disorders

Psychiatric or emotional disabilities are often viewed differently from other disabilities. Individuals with psychiatric disabilities are frequently blamed for their condition. However, students with emotional or psychological disorders have no more control over their conditions than do students with physical or sensory impairments, learning disabilities, or other chronic health conditions.

- **Anxiety/Panic Disorders** are prevalent conditions in a college population. While everyone feels anxiety in varying circumstances and to varying degrees, severe anxious reactions can have an adverse effect on many aspects of students' lives, including academic performance. Extreme anxiety and panic attacks may result in impaired learning and concentration, distorted perceptions, sleeplessness, physical agitation, tremors, lightheadedness and hyperventilation. Many students with anxiety disorders recognize their anxiety is excessive, but are unable to

control it and thus will begin avoiding the anxiety provoking situations, such as attending class.

- **Depressive Disorders (Clinical Depression/Bipolar)** are common psychiatric disorders. The primary disturbance in these disorders is that of affect or mood. The mood disorders may be manic-depressive (bipolar), in which the person alternates between extreme high and low moods; or they may be unipolar, in which the person suffers from persistent severe depression.
- **Eating Disorders** include anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and compulsive eating. In each disorder, the individual is extremely preoccupied with food, calories, and weight. If the disorder is prolonged and untreated, it can lead to serious and even life-threatening consequences.
- **Obsessive/Compulsive Disorders** combine obsessive or intrusive irrational thoughts, ideas, or impulses that repeatedly well up in one's mind with compulsive or repetitive rituals such as hand washing, counting, checking, hoarding, or arranging. This disorder occurs when an individual experiences obsessions and compulsions that last more than an hour each day, in a way that interferes with his/her life. A large body of scientific evidence suggests that these disorders result from chemical imbalances and subtle structural differences in the brain.
- **Personality Disorders** are conditions in which a person has a long-standing pattern of maladaptive behavior, particularly in relationships. People may experience extremely low self-esteem, develop an over-dependence on others, may have a tendency to hurt themselves, and may experience thoughts of suicide. Examples of personality disorders include borderline personality disorder, histrionic personality disorder, avoidant personality disorder, and several others.
- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** can occur as the result of a highly traumatic and stressful life event. People often experience anxiety or irritability, flashbacks, difficulties sleeping or concentrating, and/or an increase in arousal or sensitivity to their environments. This disorder will be more common on campus as returning veterans enter college.
- **Schizophrenia** is caused by a biochemical disturbance within the brain. Because it has been misunderstood for so long, schizophrenia has received relatively little attention. Those affected have been undeservingly stigmatized. People with schizophrenia do not have a "split personality" and are not prone to criminal violence. Like cancer and diabetes, schizophrenia has a biological basis; it is not caused by bad parenting or personal weakness. The symptoms most commonly associated with this condition are thought disorders, delusions, and hallucinations. Most of those affected with this condition respond to drug therapy, and many are able to lead productive and fulfilling lives.
- **Substance Abuse** covers conditions where individuals use alcohol or other drugs (e.g., cocaine, crack, heroin, marijuana, valium, etc.) in a way that disrupts their ability to function. Many of the characteristics of substance abuse are similar to those of emotional or psychiatric disabilities. While substance abuse is not classified as a disability under the ADA, students who have completed a supervised rehabilitation program or who are undergoing treatment for drug or

alcohol abuse and who no longer engage in the use of drugs are eligible for services as students with disabilities.

Academic Considerations

Treatment and Medication Side Effects

Medications are generally used with other treatment modalities including counseling or psychotherapy, self-help and peer support groups, and residential or social rehabilitation programs. Due to an exacerbation of their condition, some students may experience a reoccurrence of their illness that necessitates their absence from classes. Flexibility in attendance policies is encouraged in these situations.

Medications that students may be taking often have other than the intended therapeutic effect. Some of the more common side effects that may affect a student's academic performance include drowsiness, memory problems, and lack of concentration, restlessness, difficulty in speaking clearly, dry mouth, and hand tremors. Accommodations may be needed for both the disability and any side effects of medication.

The Impact of Stigma

For many consumers of mental health services, the stigma that is associated with psychological disorders can be harder to deal with than the illness itself. It is the subtle and not so subtle shame and ridicule which our society places on individuals who have a mental illness or psychiatric disability that keeps mental illness in the closet. Stigma prevents people from seeking assistance or treatment. Psychological disorders can cause behaviors that seem strange because of a lack of understanding about them. The media have frequently contributed to this lack of understanding by movies or newspaper headlines often depicting people with mental illness in a misleading and sensational manner. As our understanding of mental illness increases and our tools for treatment improve, the need for hospitalization has been eliminated for many and greatly reduced for others. Students affected by this negative stigma may be reluctant to disclose their disability.

Tips on Positive Communication and Universal Instructional Design:

- If the student approaches you for therapeutic help, refer the student to the Counseling Center. Do not take on the role of therapist.
- Use teaching methods that address a variety of different learning styles.
- Avoid offering suggestions for improving the student's condition. For example, many students feel belittled when well-intentioned professors suggest home remedies such as taking special vitamins, exercising more, etc.
- Be mindful of the language you use in class such as describing people as "crazy" or references made about various types of psychiatric conditions. Chances are

someone in your class may have the condition and will be hurt by this kind of inappropriate characterization.

Accommodations & Auxiliary Aids:

- Consider incomplete or late withdrawals in place of course failures in the event of prolonged illness or mid-semester hospitalization.
- Allow extended time on exams or deadlines for assignments in order to reduce stress or anxiety.
- Give advanced notification of projects, exams, and assignments to allow the student to plan.
- Allow use of a notetaker or use of a tape recorder in the classroom.
- Some students may need a seat near the door to allow for easy exit from the room in case of anxiety.
- Discuss privately with the student how to arrange for being called on in class if participation is vital. Many students will participate, but are fearful of being called on without prior notice.
- Allow for flexibility in the attendance requirements in case of health-related absences.
- Use of a distraction free setting for test taking may be needed.
- Allow water in classroom for medication side effects.