



Supporting Students with Mental Health Conditions

One of a series of fact sheets for staff

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INTRODUCTION

National statistics indicate that 1 in 5 Australians experience a mental health condition. Not every person who has had a mental health condition will experience disability. Many people recover from a period of illness and go on to enjoy long periods of complete health.

The term *mental health condition* refers to the actual illness or disorder, while *disability* refers to the impairment the individual experiences as a result of a mental health condition. In the university environment we are concerned with accommodating the implications of the *disability*.

RECOGNISING THE SIGNS

The symptoms and difficulties experienced by people with mental health conditions are not often visible, but they can be disabling. Some indicators of mental health conditions may include:

- feelings of hopelessness and despair, loss of motivation, lethargy and lack of energy;
- feeling anxious and tense, sometimes resulting in panic attacks and withdrawal;
- irritability, resulting in agitation or loss of emotion;
- delusions or hallucinations, resulting in vagueness or a lack of engagement; and
- talking or writing about things that don't make sense or are very unusual.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE DISABILITY ON STUDY

The focus should be on study performance or behaviour that seems to be getting in the way of a student's academic outcomes or interfering with group processes. It is important to be clear about what the issue of concern is (e.g. study skills, tutorial participation, meeting course requirements or behaviour).

The impact on study may not be continuous and may fluctuate from time to time due to the fact that most conditions are episodic in nature. Ability to study may be affected in the following ways:

- lack of motivation / lower attendance
- poor attention, listening skills, concentration & memory
- depressed mood or mood swings / low confidence
- poor organisational skills/ difficulties meeting deadlines & sticking to goals
- excessive worry / anxiety about exams
- disturbed thinking / difficulties with problem-solving
- difficulties with communication
- problems in relating to other students and staff
- marked decline in quality of work

STRATEGIES TO ASSIST YOU

Build your knowledge and skills by reading the resources located on the Services for Staff page of the Disability Service website at:

www.studentservices.utas.edu.au/disability

Familiarise yourself with the University's Disability & Counselling Services and ensure that the student is aware of the support available on campus.

Provide an environment that encourages students to disclose the nature of their disability to you. Take an individual approach as implications of disability vary from person to person. If the student has experience in managing their disability you should be able to assist them to identify strategies to meet their study requirements. Some strategies include:

- allowance for missed attendance or having to leave classes;
- provision of time extensions;
- setting goals and assessing progress regularly with the student; and
- providing some one on one time with the student to reinforce learning.

WHEN SHOULD YOU REFER?

You should refer the student on if:

- you are concerned that they are experiencing a significant degree of distress which is impacting on their ability to learn;
- communication breaks down;
- accurate assessment of their study needs is required;
- their problems go beyond your own experience and knowledge;
- you feel uncomfortable helping them with a particular issue; or
- you find yourself becoming overly involved.

TO WHOM SHOULD YOU REFER?

Refer to a Disability Adviser who can facilitate:

- assessment of each individual's support needs;
- application to Faculty for study and assessment accommodations;
- establishment of achievable workload expectations; and
- contingencies for possible late withdrawals.

Refer to a Student Counsellor who can:

- assist with development of time and stress management techniques;
- arrange case management which includes the student and relevant staff and community stakeholders; and
- implement UTAS protocol if the student is a danger to themselves or others.

DEALING WITH DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

You should intervene if:

- the student's behaviour in class is unacceptable — refer to the Addressing Disruptive Student Behaviour fact sheet and the Dealing with Difficult Behaviour Resource Package, both available at:

www.studentservices.utas.edu.au/staffresources/

- violent or threatening behaviour occurs. Follow University guidelines at:

www.admin.utas.edu.au/hr/ohs/emerg_info.pdf