

OFFICE OF DISABILITY SERVICES  
INFO PAGE

EMOTIONAL/ PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES

An emotional/ psychiatric disability in an adult may also be referred to as a mental illness. There are many types of mental illnesses. Examples include the following: paranoia, schizophrenia, clinical depression, neurosis, psychosis, anorexia, and Cushing's syndrome. Documentation for a mental illness is provided by a mental health facility or by a private licensed psychiatrist.

Mental illnesses may interfere with functioning in different ways. Many of the illnesses affect a student's ability to do certain things, such as thinking or communicating with others. Often, the persons themselves or the professionals working with them can describe specific functional limitations. Since there are many different types of mental illnesses, the following list is not complete, nor do these limitations apply to everyone who has a mental illness.

**Functional limitations due to a psychiatric disability \***

The following is a list of some of the activities that people with psychiatric disabilities may have trouble doing:

- **Screening out environmental stimuli** -an inability to block out sounds, sights, or odors which interfere with focusing on tasks

Ex.: A student may not be able to attend to a lecture while sitting near a loud fan or focus on studying in a high traffic area.

- **Sustaining concentration** -restlessness, shortened attention span, easily distracted, difficulty remembering verbal directions

Ex.: A student may have trouble focusing on one task for extended periods, difficulty reading and retaining course material, or trouble remembering instructions during an exam or a classroom exercise.

- **Maintaining stamina** -having energy to spend a whole day of classes on campus, combating drowsiness due to medications

Ex.: A student may not be able to carry a full-time course load, or take a lengthy exam at one sitting.

- **Handling time pressures and multiple tasks** -managing assignments & meeting deadlines, prioritizing tasks

Ex.: A student may not know how to decide which assignments should be done first, or be able to complete assigned tasks by the due date.

- **Interacting with others** -getting along, fitting in, chatting with fellow students, reading social cues

Ex.: A student may have difficulty talking to other students, getting notes or discussing assignments, participating in class, meeting students outside of class, or chatting with other students at class breaks.

- **Responding to negative feedback** --understanding and interpreting criticism or poor grades, difficulty knowing what to do to improve, or how to initiate changes because of low self-esteem

Ex.: A student may not seem to understand the feedback-given, becomes upset when criticism is given on an assignment, or wants to withdraw from class because of a poor grade on an exam.

- **Responding to change** -coping with unexpected changes in coursework, such as changes in the assignments or exam due dates, or changes in instructors.

Ex.: A student may need to learn new routines, or feel unduly stressed when requirements or instructors change, or when new expectations are introduced midsemester.

\* Adapted from Mancuso, L.L. (1990). Reasonable accommodations for workers with psychiatric disabilities. *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal*, 14(2), 3-19.

In general, the following supports may be helpful to students with mental illness. Specific strategies and accommodations may be provided by your campus Office of Disability Services:

- Maximize use of the current, existing campus support of Disability Services.
- Recognize and anticipate periods of academic inactivity (stop-outs versus drop-outs).
- Clarify campus policies regarding acceptable student and classroom behavior.
- Apply same behavioral expectations/code of conduct to students with psychiatric disabilities as you would any other student.
- Help students to become aware of their behavioral responsibilities in the classroom by setting concrete guidelines and clear academic requirements.

For additional information, please contact your campus Disability Services advisor or visit the website of the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University, at <http://www.bu.edu/SARPSYHC> as needed.