

Resources

General

Always ask people who have disabilities what their particular needs are and make reasonable adjustments according to their specific requirements. Two people with the same disability may not have the same needs.

Mental Health Difficulties

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there is no one "official" definition of mental health. Cultural differences, subjective assessments, and competing professional theories all affect how "mental health" is defined. In general, most experts agree that "mental health" and "mental illness" are not opposites. Some experts consider mental health as a continuum. In other words, the absence of a recognized mental disorder is not necessarily an indicator of mental health. One way to think about mental health is by looking at how effectively and successfully a person functions. Feeling capable and competent; being able to handle normal levels of stress, maintain satisfying relationships, and lead an independent life; and the ability to "bounce back," or recover from difficult situations, are all signs of mental health. Mental health is therefore a state of emotional and psychological well-being in which an individual is able to use his or her cognitive and emotional capabilities, function in society, and meet the ordinary demands of everyday life (Merriam-Webster). Other concepts of mental health include subjective well-being, perceived self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, intergenerational dependence, and self-actualization of one's intellectual and emotional potential, among others. These definitions of mental health highlights emotional well being, the capacity to live a full and creative life and the flexibility to deal with life's inevitable challenges.

What is mental illness? Mental illness is a term that describes a broad range of mental and emotional conditions. The question is difficult to answer in a concrete way as many of the signs and symptoms of experienced by somebody with mental health issues will be part of normal experience, However, when the signs, symptoms and feelings disrupt or negatively impact on the individuals ability to function effectively in their every day life, then this may be termed mental ill health. Disruption in function may occur in relation to the following areas:

- **Thinking** – For example, poor concentration, thoughts may be disrupted, slow, rapid change of topic or have no connection.
- **Feeling** – For example, fear, sadness, elation, rapid mood change.
- **Behaviour** – For example, poor motivation, tearful, less active, disorganised, socially withdrawn, difficulty sleeping.
- **Physical** – For example, reduced or increased weight, nausea, tremor, palpitations.

There are many different types of mental illness with different signs and symptoms they include, stress, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorders, panic attacks, schizophrenia, phobias, post traumatic stress disorders and personality disorder.

The impact of mental illness may be far reaching and can include a wide range of signs and symptoms including, social withdrawal, poor concentration, difficulty with planning and organising, poor work / life balance, lack of confidence, poor motivation, irritability, difficulty in sequencing thoughts and making decisions, fatigue, distraction.

Support

General Guidance

Many students experiencing mental distress/illness may find it very difficult to ask for help or even avoid facing the difficult issues at hand. This can lead to an escalation of difficulties and more distress for the student. Early identification of issues often leads to more proactive solutions and more positive outcomes in facilitating appropriate support for the student. Some early warning signs that might indicate that a student is experiencing difficulties with studies include students with lots of medical notes, students with poor or sporadic attendance, lots of requests for extensions or deferrals or students who are avoiding contact. You may also notice some signs in terms of the student's behaviour:

- The student telling you or someone else that he/she has a problem.
- Changes in the pattern or standard of academic work.
- Significant changes in appearance such as loss or gain of weight, deterioration of personal hygiene or signs of sleeplessness / fatigue.
- A noticeable change of smell, which may result from increased use of alcohol or non-prescription drugs.
- Change in the way he or she sounds (for example flat tone, very quiet, loud and agitated).
- Change of mood from previous experience of him or her (for example very up and down, miserable, tired).
- Other people, such as friends, housemates or relatives, expressing concern to you.
- Talk or evidence of self-harming behaviour such as arm cutting.

If you suspect that a student is experiencing mental health issues don't avoid talking about the situation or pretend nothing is wrong. Simply asking somebody if they are all right might provide the opportunity they have been looking for to talk. Have an awareness of available help or where to seek further advice so that you can signpost the student to appropriate resources.

1. Instructions

- Provide students with clear instruction preferably verbally and in writing. Use short and concise explanations, avoid long strings of verbal information, which can be hard to take in. Where possible break complex information down into bullet points.
- Provide opportunities for students to ask you questions about any instructions on a one-to-one basis. If in doubt, check with the student on a one-to-one basis that they have understood.
- Remember to set and state boundaries clearly. Stick to boundaries and departmental guidelines and be clear with the student about what is expected, when and what will happen if this is not achieved. For example be clear about the process of requesting extensions and what the student needs to do when requesting an extension. Write down any agreements or action plans if necessary.
- Be aware that people with mental health issues may find it hard to make decisions when faced with choices. Don't give too many choices or leave things too open ended. Where possible give some time to reflect and decide on a response. Allow the person time to talk to you about pros and cons of a decision if this helps and be as specific and concrete as possible in offering advice or instructions.

2. Questions

- Many students with mental health issues are very fearful of being put on the spot. Where possible allow individuals time to process or to prepare to answer questions

and try to avoid putting people on the spot. It may be helpful to write any questions up for students to see. Be prepared to repeat questions or information as needed.

3. Lectures

- Where possible provide handouts or on line resources to supplement notes.
- Allow the student to record information in lectures.
- Where possible, particularly in long sessions, allow frequent breaks or adequate time between taught sessions.

4. Reading

- Reading can be very time consuming and difficult for students with mental health issues. Where possible provide the student with a more specific or guided reading lists. Help the student to understand the aim of reading so that they have a way of ensuring that learning outcomes are being met and that they are on target.

5. Attendance and hand in dates

- Some students may have problems in attending taught sessions, lectures and seminars. If attendance becomes an issue, contact the student regarding difficulties they may have with attendance: if necessary make contact with the DRC.
- It is a common problem that work may not be handed in on time. Where there is a health issue, it is important to be understanding and flexible in these circumstances. However, it is also important in providing support to adhere to departmental guidelines with regards to extensions, e.g where stipulated asking the student to provide medical evidence.
- When offering extensions, consider that in some circumstances, extensions can cause additional stress. Discuss with the student the pros and cons of having an extension.

6. Time management / Planning and Organising

- Students experiencing mental health issues can often have difficulty in managing their time and daily tasks. Encourage the student to break things down into smaller tasks.
- Students will benefit from knowing about changes to timetable or routine well in advance so that they can plan and manage their time adequately.

7. Tests and exams

- Exam and assessment create high levels of anxiety for many students. Alternatives to exams may be helpful for some students with mental health issues. The student can be asked to contact the Disability Resource Centre to discuss their needs in relation to exams in more detail.
- Provide as much advanced notice as possible of in class tests or exams to give individuals adequate preparation time and enable them to ask questions/speak to tutors re any concerns early on. In addition, provide clear guidance and pointers on what will be required for the exam, revision and methods of preparation. Some students may find feedback on revision e.g. practices essays, useful in guiding their exam preparation and in determining when they have done enough.

8. Group work and presentations

- Many students find group work and presentations very challenging. Students might lack confidence in themselves and their abilities and find social interaction, being the centre of attention, or being put on the spot very stressful or anxiety provoking.

Understanding an individual's needs in relation to group work can enable the student to participate.

- If a student is having difficulty, it may be helpful to ask the student in private what may facilitate their interaction in the group and support them in this process. Advise the student to make contact with the DRC about support for this.
- Support the student in preparing for the presentation e.g. offer reassurance and feedback on their preparation or help find a role in the group where they do not present directly.
- In some cases where the presentation is part of learning outcomes or is assessed the suitability of alternative methods may need to be discussed with the school disability representative or with the DRC. For example the student may be able to present to a smaller group or to the tutor alone.

9. Field Trips and study abroad

- Provide as much information as possible about and study trips. Handouts that clearly explain what will happen and give clear guidance on what's expected will be helpful.
- It may be important to communicate and assess the individual's particular requirements and support needs prior to the field trip, possibly including the DRC in any discussions.
- Examples of adjustments for student with mental health issues on field trips include having a room alone, students taking their own food and having facilities to prepare their own food, arranging an alternative to the field trip that meets learning outcomes but is based nearer to home, arranging a meeting with tutors to discuss support needs in depth prior to departure.

10. General

In general terms when working with students experiencing mental health issues some useful pointers are as follows:

- Always adhere to clear boundaries e.g. keep to handbook and departmental guidelines which allow for an early response and clear coordinated processes to guide actions.
- Where appropriate refer to University policies and guidelines e.g. fitness to study policy, mental health guidelines and fitness to practise policies may act as a guide to action.
- Ensure that students can talk to you on an individual basis with privacy.
- Ask the student if there is anything that they can do or others can do that has helped them in the past.
- Ask the student how they see their issues and what is their primary concern.
- Work within your limits, sign post on and seek advice if you are not sure.
- If you feel you can offer support be aware of what this might involve and be clear with the person about what you can and cannot offer within the remit of your role.
- If in doubt find out!! Seek general advice about what's on offer from appropriate support services e.g. DRC, Guild, Counselling, G.P and refer on as required.
- Consider your limits and be very clear and specific about these e.g. your boundaries in relation to confidentiality and what will you do if you think somebody is at risk or does not turn up to an appointment?
- Seek support for yourself

For more information, see
Mental Health Matters

<http://www.mental-health-matters.com>

Royal College of Psychiatrists <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk>
Students Against Depression <http://studentdepression.org>
Mental Health Foundation <http://mentalhealth.org.uk>

Source: Promoting Mental Health by Supporting Students, University of Exeter, Disability Resource Centre and *WorkWAYS*, (2004), University of Exeter, Exeter, (p.5).

Sensitive Responses to Disability

Think about the words you use.

Avoid	Use instead
the handicapped	disabled people
the disabled	disabled people
Cripple, invalid	disabled person
Spastic	person who has cerebral palsy
afflicted by, suffers from, victim of...	has or with... (the condition or impairment)
mentally handicapped, retarded, subnormal	learning impaired
confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	wheelchair user
able-bodied	non-disabled
disabled toilet*	accessible toilet*

Source: www.scope.org.uk (*not on the scope list)