

Teaching Students with Invisible Disabilities

Learning Resources Department
Improving the Quality of Education for Students with Disabilities

Introduction

Invisible disabilities are the most common type of disability among college students. For example, students with learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and/or psychiatric disabilities may request accommodations even though they do not appear to have a disability. There are numerous other hidden or invisible disabilities such as heart condition, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, and Seizure Disorder. It is also important to remember that the severity of functional limitations do not depend on your ability to see the disability.

There may be several students in your classroom with invisible disabilities. Of these students, only some will request accommodations. For those students who request accommodations, it is important to express your willingness to accommodate all types of disabilities and to be supportive of their accommodation requests. If you would like verification that a student has a disability, ask the student to provide you with a letter from the Student Services Office. Student Services produces these letters only for students who are registered with this office and for whom documentation of the disability is on file. Student Services can also send you this letter directly.

Learning Disabilities

Description

Students with learning disabilities often learn differently than their peers. Although they have average or above average intelligence, there is frequently a discrepancy between their ability and their achievement in specific areas due to a central nervous system dysfunction. A learning disability is a permanent disorder that interferes with integrating, acquiring, and/or demonstrating verbal or nonverbal abilities and skills. Frequently, there are some processing or memory deficits.

Each student with a learning disability may need different types of accommodations, services, and/or supports based on what area(s) of learning is affected by the disability. Students with learning disabilities may have difficulties with some of the following:

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Reading comprehension	Processing speed
Written expression	Oral expression
Mathematics	Auditory processing
Oral expression	Visual processing
Auditory processing	Abstract reasoning
Visual processing	Visual spatial skills
Abstract reasoning	Processing speed
Visual spatial skills	

Keep in mind that one individual does not have difficulty with all of the above-mentioned areas, just generally a few of those areas. Also, it is not unusual for a person with a learning disability to be gifted in some areas.

Guidelines

Exam Accommodations: Assist these students in arranging for appropriate exam accommodations whether you arrange these accommodations yourself or coordinate them with Student Services. Student Services can send you a verification letter delineating the appropriate accommodations for a particular student.

Multi-modality Instruction: Provide important information and assignments in both oral and written formats to help promote accessibility to course content. A multi-modality approach to instruction assists these students in finding a modality that is consistent with their learning strength.

Alternative Format: Coordinate with Student Services to ensure that course materials will be available in alternative format. Some of these students need print material in alternative format (e.g., audiotape or electronic format). When you are contacted by the a student, it is important that you immediately provide information about the required textbook(s) and readings you will be using as well as any other reading expectations. It takes a considerable amount of time to convert materials into alternative format.

Study Aids: Provide study questions, study guides, and opportunities for questions and answers to help students review essential course content.

Exam Aids: Permit these students to use simple calculators, hand held spell checkers, and scratch paper during exams.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Description

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity that is more frequent and severe than is typically observed in individuals at a comparable level of development (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV TR, 2000). Students with ADHD or ADD (without hyperactivity) may have difficulty with one or more of the following areas:

Concentration	Following directions
Distractibility	Listening
Organization	Sitting for lengthy periods
Completing tasks	Transitioning
Sedentary tasks like reading	Planning

Some students with ADHD take medication for their condition. This medication may be a stimulant, which actually calms them and helps him/her focus on tasks. Anti-depressants may also be used.

Guidelines

Assistance with Structure: Provide a syllabus with clearly delineated expectations and due dates. Study guides, review sheets, and frequent opportunities for feedback are helpful in providing structure and organization.

Exam Accommodations: Assist students in arranging for appropriate exam accommodations with Student Services. Many students with ADHD use exam accommodations including extended time and a distraction-reduced exam space.

Access to Class Notes: Some of these students have difficulty focusing and concentrating and for this reason may need access to classroom notes. Your assistance may be needed to ensure that they get notes.

Classroom Distractions: If a student appears extremely distracted, it may be appropriate to encourage the student to sit near the front of the class, away from doors, air conditioning units, windows, or any other possible sources of distraction.

Psychiatric Disability

Description

Students with psychiatric disabilities exhibit "... a persistent psychological disorder or psychiatric disorder, emotional or mental illness that adversely affects educational performance and/or functioning and frequently requires medication." (<http://disserv3.stu.umn.edu/AG-S/3-5.html>, 1999). Descriptions of certain types of psychiatric disorders follow:

Depression is a major disorder that can begin at any age. Major depression may be characterized by a depressed mood most of each day, a lack of pleasure in most activities, thoughts of suicide, insomnia, and feelings of worthlessness or guilt.

Bipolar disorder (manic depressive disorder) causes a person to experience periods of mania and depression. In the manic phase, a person might experience inflated self-esteem and a decreased need to sleep; however, in the depressive phase, a person may experience a lack of energy and less self-esteem and interest in family, friends, and school.

Anxiety disorders can disrupt a person's ability to concentrate and cause hyperventilation, a racing heart, chest pains, dizziness, panic, and extreme fear. Examples of anxiety disorders include panic disorder, simple phobias, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Schizophrenia can cause a person to experience delusions and hallucinations in addition to depressed mood and flat affect.

In most situations you will not be aware that you have a student with a psychiatric disability in your classroom. Because students do not show any outward signs of the disability doesn't mean that their disability is any less disabling than a more visible disability. Many of these students are fearful of and have faced stigmatization because of their disability. Some do not need or request any accommodations, and some require a variety of accommodations. For some the disability is temporary, while for others it is chronic. With medication and/or therapy, people with psychiatric disabilities may learn to manage their symptoms.

Guidelines

Exam Accommodations: Assist these students in arranging for exam accommodations when requested. The exam accommodations that are most commonly used are a distraction reduced exam space and extra time.

Make-up Work: Collaborate with students about arrangements to makeup tests and other assignments, allowing them extra time since these students may miss class during serious psychiatric episodes.

Welcoming and Supportive Environment: Many students with psychiatric disabilities fear stigmatization because of their disability so if a student shares his/her disability with you, be supportive and welcoming when a student requests assistance in arranging for accommodations.

Considerations for Teaching All Students with Disabilities

Universal Design for Learning: "Universal design is an approach to designing course instruction, materials, and content to benefit people of all learning styles without adaptation or retrofitting." By incorporating Universal Design principles in instruction that allow students with disabilities access to the classroom, you may also be designing instruction that works better for everyone in the class. Classes designed with this concept in mind offer a variety of methods of content presentation, flexible teaching strategies, and options for demonstrating mastery of course content.

Expectations: Although many students with disabilities need accommodations, expect these students to perform at a level commensurate with their peers. Do not have a special grading scale or other criteria for them.

Collaboration: Don't hesitate to call ODS to arrange for a three-way meeting between you, the student's assigned disability counselor, and the student to work out any issues and to collaborate on the best instructional strategies for the student.
(Visit www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/rights.html)

Guided Notes on the Web: Providing students with guided notes that they can access through the Web prior to class assists them with focusing on the appropriate material. It will help them to learn more effectively in the classroom as well as take better notes.

Web-Enhanced Learning: If classroom materials are available on the Web, check with the Web Accessibility Center (WAC) to ensure that the web format is compatible with adaptive technology.

Comprehensive Syllabus: A comprehensive syllabus with clearly delineated statements about expectation is helpful to students who need help with structure and organization.

Inappropriate Behavior: Students with disabilities are subject to the same code of conduct required of any student at Ohio State. If there are incidences of inappropriate behavior, meet privately to discuss issues of behavior and encourage students to seek help. Give concise and honest feedback about behaviors that are inappropriate. If there are situations involving threats or abusive behavior, call the University Police. If the student is so disruptive that he/she prevents you from effectively teaching your class, call Student Judicial Affairs. You are always welcome to consult with ODS. These situations are not likely to occur, but it is wise to have a plan.

Remember...

It's your responsibility to support Ohio State's commitment to equal access to education. This information will assist you when you have students with disabilities in your class; Learning Resources staff members are also available to help you. Some key elements are:

- **Alternative Format:** Many students need print materials in alternative format (scanned to disks, audio tapes, Braille, or enlarged). Work quickly with Student Services and the student to make sure students get materials converted in a timely fashion.
- **Verification of a Disability:** If you would like verification that a student has a disability, ask the student to provide you with a letter. ODS produces these letters only for students who are registered with this office and for whom documentation of the disability is on file.
- **Class Notes:** Some students with disabilities have difficulty taking notes. They may need your assistance in getting a volunteer note taker, or you may provide them a copy of your notes and/or copies of overheads and other class materials.
- **Proctor Sheets:** A student with a disability may ask you to complete a proctor sheet, a form that facilitates the administration of your tests with accommodations at Student Services. It is essential for you to fill the form out completely and quickly so that arrangements can be made for exam accommodations.

Resources

University of Minnesota Disability Services Website: <http://disserv3.stu.umn.edu/AG-S/3-5.html>

The Ohio State University Partnership Grant Website: <http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg>

The Ohio State University Office for Disability Services (ODS) Website:
<http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/>

The Ohio State University Web Accessibility Center Website:
<http://www.wac.ohio-state.edu/>

The Ohio State University Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator's Office Website:
<http://ada.osu.edu/>

American Psychiatric Association, (2000). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 4th edition, Text Revised. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.