

Psychiatric Impairments

There is a broad range of psychiatric impairments from mild depression to chronic disorders such as Bipolar Disorder or Schizophrenia. Psychiatric impairments are sometimes classified as “invisible” disabilities because they are not as readily apparent as other types of disabilities such as mobility impairments and sensory disabilities. Several common psychiatric impairments include:

- **Anxiety Disorder** – a disorder in which anxiety is the prominent disturbance; individuals feel anxious without any apparent reason and cannot identify the source of threat; characterized by depression, avoidance, inability to concentrate, and procrastination; examples of anxiety disorders include panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- **Bipolar Disorder** – a disorder in which individuals experience periods of both mania (inflated self-esteem and decreased need to sleep) and depression (lack of energy and motivation); an individual’s ability to concentrate, organize, and study are affected
- **Depression** – a disorder characterized by a depressed mood, fatigue, insomnia, an increased need to sleep, low self-esteem, difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- **Schizophrenia** – a disorder which can cause individuals to lose touch with reality, often experiencing delusions and hallucinations and having disorganized behavior and speech; and individual’s ability to concentrate, organize, and study are affected

Negative stereotypes about these impairments may impact a student’s decision to self-disclose his/her disability. The episodic and unpredictable onset and recurrence of illness can also interrupt the educational process; therefore the need for accommodations, as well as the specific accommodations may change. Additionally, side effects from medication may impact memory, attention, alertness, and activity level.

Students with psychiatric impairments can be affected in different ways, as presented in the following examples:

- A student with bipolar disorder who has a history of hospitalization may need consideration for additional absences
- A student with depression with a lessened ability to concentrate due to the depression and side effects of medication may need extended test time

Students with psychiatric impairments may be treated with a combination of medication, counseling, and/or behavioral therapy. Additionally, students with

psychiatric impairments may be more susceptible to the common stressors of college life: increased academic demands, forming new interpersonal relationships, living away from home of the first time, etc.

Common accommodations:

- access to class notes
- tape recording class lecture
- additional absences
- extended test time and/or testing in a low distraction area
- availability of lecture notes, learning materials, practice tests, etc. in electronic format

General classroom considerations:

- an encouraging, validating classroom environment
- syllabi with clear information regarding test dates, assignment/project deadlines, etc. can help students plan, organize, and prioritize requirements
- breaking large amounts of information or new or difficult concepts into smaller parts or steps
- starting each class with an overview of materials to be presented; concluding each class with a brief summary/review of key points; providing a time for questions

For more information on working with students with psychiatric impairments go to: <http://www.washington.edu/doi/Faculty>