Psychological Disabilities

Description:
Some individuals experience severe disturbances in thinking, feeling, relating, and behavior. Many different psychological disorders can have a cognitive, emotional, and/or social impact on a student’s ability to function in an academic environment. The symptoms and associated impairment may be either chronic or episodic. *Test anxiety by itself is not considered a psychological disorder.*

Possible Characteristics and Symptoms:
- Chronic absences
- Consistently late assignments
- Extreme highs or lows in mood
- Anxieties
- Problems concentrating, remembering
- Marked personality change
- Confused or disorganized thinking
- Thinking or talking about suicide
- Denial of obvious problems

Medication side effects:
- Drowsiness
- Fatigue
- Excessive thirst
- Blurred vision
- Hand tremors

Types of Psychological Disorders:

**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:** (previously Manic Depressive disorder) causes a person to experience periods of mania and depression. In the manic phase, a student might experience inflated self-esteem and a decreased need for sleep. In the depressive phase, the student may experience a lack of energy, lower self-esteem, and less interest in family, friends, and school.

**Anxiety disorders:** can disrupt a person’s ability to concentrate and may cause hyperventilation, a racing heart, chest pains, dizziness, panic, and extreme fear. Examples of anxiety disorders include panic disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), social phobias (an incapacitating fear of social interactions), specific phobias (such as an intense fear of a specific object or event), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (which may also include flashbacks and dissociations).
Schizophrenia: is a thought disorder that can cause a person to experience delusions and hallucinations in addition to depressed mood and flat affect. The individual is likely to have difficulty with daily functional tasks and interpersonal relationships.

In most situations you will not be aware that you have a student with a psychological disability in your classroom. When students do not show any outward signs of a disability, it doesn’t mean that the condition is any less disabling than a more visible disability. Some students do not need or request any accommodations, and some require a variety of accommodations. For some students, the disability is temporary, and for others it is chronic. With medication and/or therapy, students with psychological disabilities can learn to manage their symptoms.

**Guidelines:**

**Supportive environment:** When a student discloses a psychological disability and requests assistance in arranging for accommodations, make every effort to be supportive and welcoming. Try to avoid comments that inadvertently suggest that the student could do something to better prevent or control the symptoms. Provide regular feedback on academic work. Remember that you don’t need specialized knowledge to help a student through a rough time.

**Behavior:** Be aware of how medication can impact a student. Ignore behaviors that may not be typical, but are not disruptive.

**Periodic breaks:** The student may have periodic breaks during class as an accommodation. Consider priority seating, allowing the student to sit near the door or at the back of the class so that he or she can leave quickly if necessary. It is best to work out an arrangement for this accommodation ahead of time.

**Disability-related absences:** Students with psychological disabilities may miss class during serious psychological episodes. The disability-related absences accommodation requires reasonable flexibility with the attendance policy when that flexibility does not fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Discuss with the student a plan for making up tests or assignments that are missed due to a disability-related absence. It is important to avoid penalizing a student for his/her disability and, at the same time, to maintain the integrity of the requirements of the course. Contact SDS or see Disability Related Absences under Access Policy on the SDS website for questions about the disability-related absences accommodation.