

Supporting students with mental health difficulties

It is important to be aware that some students with mental health difficulties will find the support they are receiving from outside agencies sufficient to meet their needs. Mental health needs do not automatically require study-related support inside or outside the classroom. However, students with mental health difficulties usually do need ongoing support and understanding from their teachers. These teachers will, in turn, need support from learning support staff.

The student will need different levels of support at different stages and phases of

their mental health difficulties and of their education. For example, some may need a great deal of support at the start of their time at the school/college, when going on a field trip or when there is to be a change of teacher. This means that there should be an ongoing assessment of needs.

There also needs to be an awareness of the different ways that students with mental health difficulties may perceive the situation, as the examples below illustrate.

| | Student A | Student B |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Has the problem been diagnosed recently?</i> | About two years ago. | Just before the start of term, not many people know about it. |
| <i>How does it affect your life as a whole?</i> | I'm often called names. I don't have many friends now because I'm a nutter. | I get lots of counselling and medication. Hopefully I'll get better |
| <i>Sometimes medication can have side effects. Have you noticed any?</i> | Too many. I get the shakes; I need to move about or my muscles stiffen up. I look like a loony sometimes. | My vision is affected, sometimes things become blurred. |
| <i>What clinics or meetings do you attend to help you deal with this?</i> | I see a psycho once a month. I don't say why I'm away that day. | The clinic make me an appointment when they need to see me. |
| <i>We are here to help students with their studies and to talk to. Do you think you will use these services?</i> | I've not got learning difficulties – I'm not thick. | What do the others do if they come to you? |
| <i>Students sometimes tell us that their medication means they have needed to change their study habits. For example, they easily forget what they have read. We have lots of techniques available to overcome this.</i> | If you can show me how to get organised, I'll be OK. | My medication makes me really tired. I can't remember what day it is sometimes. Can you help with that sort of thing? |

Supporting students in the classroom

The SENCO/learning support co-ordinator will play an important role in identifying, informing and supporting teachers with regard to the reasonable adjustments that students with mental health problems may need. Reasonable adjustments may include some or all of the following:

- pre-arranged preferential seating arrangements
- being allowed to drink water in class
- being allowed to chew gum in class
- being allowed to wear a coat or a hat in class
- pre-arranged breaks during the lesson
- being allowed to leave class early or late
- being allowed to come in when everyone else is seated
- a flexible timetable
- a note taker, dictaphone or photocopies of another student's notes
- use of a laptop
- provision of some form of peer support such as a 'study buddy'
- extended deadlines
- advance notice of assignment deadlines
- assistance with assignments during hospitalisation
- changing the font size and or format of handouts to make them more accessible
- providing writing frameworks and guidelines.

It is important that support is consistent in every class and must be overseen.

Mental health and the learning support area

The SENCO or learning support co-ordinator is often the first port of call for a student experiencing mental health difficulties. Students may not understand their emotions and may wish to discuss them with someone who they know helps students. The role of the teacher in these situations is to discuss the implications of the problem, not to make an amateur diagnosis.

Most schools and colleges allocate an area to learning support. This may become a haven for some students and can provide a non-judgemental, supportive environment. Many students – including those with mental health needs – will come in order to temporarily escape the pressures of study. Don't immediately assume that they need or want study-related support. Many will simply want a place to unwind and 'recharge'.

Some students with mental health needs find crowds and busy environments such as the canteen stressful. They may need permission to eat lunch in the learning support area. Some schools and colleges have established a corner where magazines are available and quiet music plays to allow students to relax or to calm down. Others may need to use this area as an agreed 'time out' place to go when the classroom situation has become too challenging. Some will use it as part of an individual agreement to receive regular study skills and self-management support.