

Mental Health Disabilities

Definition

Mental health disabilities are psychological and neurological disorders that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, moods, and ability to relate to others. You may also hear these called "psychiatric disabilities" or "mental health issues." The term "mental illness" is falling out of favor but is still widely used.

Background Information

Examples of mental health disabilities include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and schizophrenia. These types of disability are often invisible, or not apparent. Physical disabilities are usually more obvious; assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, call attention to an individual. However, mental health issues are often not obvious.

Many people with mental health issues lead typical or near-typical lives. Others are overwhelmed by their disability, and are unable to participate in the activities they love. You may also observe the following characteristics of people with mental health disabilities:

- ▶ Drastic changes in mood; switching between feeling "on top of the world" and severe depression (bipolar disorder, formerly called manic-depressive)
- ▶ Feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts (depression)
- ▶ Acting jumpy, "on edge," or having flashbacks (vivid memories of a stressful event) that may be triggered by loud noises or bright lights (PTSD)
- ▶ Paranoid behavior, delusional thoughts, hallucinations, or hearing voices (schizophrenia)

Accommodating Patients with Mental Health Disabilities

- ▶ **Treat the patient as an individual.** Do not make assumptions about how their mental health disability will cause them to behave.
- ▶ **Focus on the person's reason for coming to the hospital.** For example, if a patient presents with insomnia, do not assume that it is related to their PTSD unless you have clinical evidence for that.
- ▶ **Allow patients to be accompanied by their service animals.** The legal definition of "service animal" is frequently revised. However, many individuals with mental health issues benefit from the emotional support and comfort that their animal provides.

Communicating with Patients with Mental Health Disabilities

- ▶ **Be calm and clear, as you would with any patient.** There is a myth that patients with mental health disabilities are more prone to violence than other patients, but this is not the case.
- ▶ **Don't take it personally.** Mental health disabilities may cause patients to seem antisocial, distracted, paranoid, or withdrawn. Be courteous and patient. Do not assume you have upset them unless they give you reason to think so.

- **Provide feedback.** If a patient with challenging behavior says or does something thoughtful, tell them that you appreciate their kindness. And if a person is yelling or acting disrespectful towards you, explain that you do not like to be treated this way.

Clinical Scenario

Victor was diagnosed with schizophrenia ten years ago. Since then, he has been able to continue working as a journalist with occasional interruptions. Once or twice per year, Victor has a brief stay in the hospital after an acute episode of paranoid or psychotic behavior. He is at your hospital after a recent episode.

You go to Victor's room today to talk about changes to his health insurance. When you walk into his room, he is typing quickly on his laptop and has papers spread across his bed. He looks up and asks, "Who sent you?" You calmly explain that you are a case manager for the hospital and have a question about his insurance. He seems upset by the interruption, so you ask, "When would be the best time for us to talk?"

Resources

Mental Health Works: Accommodations

<http://bit.ly/V2ZuMr>

Barking and Dagenham: Accommodation for People with Mental Illness

<http://bit.ly/VF95zy>

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services

<http://1.usa.gov/153iQlf>

Job Accommodation Network

<http://askjan.org/media/Bipolar.html>

Resource Sheet No. 6 • Mental Health Disabilities

Inclusive Health Care was developed by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and Boston Children's Hospital. We have decades of experience in workforce training and specialized consultation related to disability inclusion.

