



## The College Experience: Tips for Reducing Stress and Getting the Accommodations You Need (1 of 2)

*College can be a time of new independence, personal growth, and intellectual pursuit. But if you have a psychiatric disability, pursuing your degree while managing the disability can be a challenge.*

College-age adults are especially vulnerable to mental health problems, in part because many such problems emerge in the late teens or early 20s. In fact, according to NAMI on Campus, an estimated 27 percent of young adults between 18 and 24 have diagnosable mental health problems. And the numbers are growing: A 2003 National Mental Health Association survey of counseling center directors showed that more than 80 percent of colleges nationwide have seen an increase in problems related to mental health in the last five years. A 2004 survey by the American College Health Association showed that clinical depression among college students has increased nearly 5 percent over the last five years.

Many colleges are making the effort to adapt. For example, according to The New York Times, Duke University has asked its faculty members to try to keep track of changes in their students' behavior, such as if a student suddenly becomes withdrawn or stays away from class.

### **Stress**

The new stressors that college students experience may exacerbate the symptoms of mental illness. Common stressors include:

- greater academic demands;
- being on one's own in a new environment;
- changes in family relations;
- financial responsibilities;
- changes in one's social life;
- exposure to new people, ideas, and temptations;
- heightened awareness of one's sexual identity;
- unhealthy lifestyles, such as not getting enough sleep or eating unhealthy foods; and
- preparing for life after graduation.

### **Tips for Reducing Stress**

There are many ways to reduce stress. Here are some ideas:

- Add physical activity to your routine, at least every other day.
- Set both long- and short-term goals. Write down your goals and how you plan to meet them, and make time in your schedule for working toward them.
- Manage your time. Develop a schedule that provides for academic and social time, as well as physical exercise.

- Find 20 minutes of "alone" time to relax. Take a walk, write in a journal or meditate.
- Talk to a person you trust — such as a friend, roommate, family member, professor, significant other or co-worker — about your concerns.

### **Barriers to Getting Help**

In addition to the stressors noted above, a recent study, The Needs Assessment Project: Exploring Barriers and Opportunities for College Students with Psychiatric Disabilities, found five primary barriers that impact students with psychiatric disabilities and the people who are responsible for providing them with accommodations. The study examined data from 39 focus groups at 13 colleges and universities across the country. College students with mental illnesses, faculty, administrators, disability service providers, and campus and community mental health providers were included in the study. According to the study, the barriers are:

1. **Stereotypes:** When students disclose their disability, they are often subject to incorrect judgments and stereotyping by others.
2. **Complex Nature of Psychiatric Disabilities:** It can be challenging for students to simultaneously manage their disability and keep up with their academic requirements in a way that reflects their abilities.
3. **Access to Resources:** Getting access to services, such as insurance coverage and financial help, may be difficult, especially because of the need to navigate through bureaucracies that are confusing and uncoordinated.
4. **Access to Mental Health Information and Services:** Students can be frustrated by the limited information on psychiatric disorders and by the limited access to mental health and support services.
5. **Coordination of Services:** Students often find that there is a lack of coordination and communication between service providers on and off campus.

*Colleges need to address these barriers so that college is an enriching and enjoyable experience for students with psychiatric disabilities.*

### **Reasonable Accommodations**

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, colleges cannot discriminate against people with disabilities. Therefore, colleges must make reasonable accommodations to help students who are qualified academically but are having difficulty because of a disability. One example of an accommodation would be providing a student who is in academic trouble because of his or her illness an incomplete in a course instead of a failing grade.





## The College Experience / Getting Accommodations (2 of 2)

To establish a need for accommodations, the student must apply to the school's Office of Disabilities. (Students may be unaware of the services provided by the Office of Disabilities because the services may be under-publicized.)

To be eligible for accommodations, a student needs to provide documentation from his or her psychiatrist informing the Office of Disabilities about the disability and the need for accommodations. (Students have the right to confidentiality.)

Typical accommodations for students with psychiatric disabilities include:

- preferential seating, especially seating near the door to allow easier exit from class for breaks;
- an assigned classmate as volunteer assistant;
- beverages permitted in class;
- prearranged or frequent breaks;
- tape recorder use;
- a notetaker or photocopy of another's notes;
- early availability of syllabus and textbooks;
- exams in alternate format (e.g., from multiple choice to essay, oral, presentation, role-play, or portfolio);
- extended time for test taking;
- exam in a separate, quiet and non-distracting room;
- increased frequency of exams;
- substitute assignments in specific circumstances;
- advance notice of assignments;
- extended time to complete assignments.

### Supports

In addition to the accommodations provided by the Office of Disabilities, many colleges also provide other supports, such as:

- Counseling and other psychiatric services. These services are often covered by tuition or the college's health plan. Therapy at college health centers is generally very brief, lasting only four to six sessions. Students who have yet to receive a diagnosis and are facing problems also have access to therapy. Support groups may also be available. The quality and comprehensiveness of services vary a great deal.
- Workshops and Internet chat lines. They are available through some colleges. Penn State, for example, offers a chat line on homesickness.
- Student groups, such as the national organization Active Minds on Campus, can work to compile lists of available resources and run educational campaigns about mental illnesses.

### Conclusion

*College can involve extra stressors, such as being in a new environment and on your own. There are also many barriers that may have a negative impact on your college experience. At the same time, colleges are trying to accommodate the needs of the increasing numbers of students who have psychiatric disabilities. Know your rights and options. Colleges are required to provide reasonable accommodations. Most colleges have support services for you to use; if these are inadequate, outside services are also available. College can be a challenge, but with the right supports it can also be a very valuable and enjoyable experience.*

**NOTE:** The University of Pennsylvania Collaborative is conducting an Internet survey of the post-secondary experiences of individuals with mental illnesses and currently (2/06) has almost 400 responses. Find out more at <http://www.upennrrtc.org/research/education.html>. Findings available Fall 2006.

### Resources (websites as of February 1, 2006)

Active Minds at Duke. 2004. Duke University, Durham, NC. <<http://www.duke.edu/web/activeminds/contact.html>>.

Active Minds Chapters. Active Minds, Washington, D.C. <<http://www.activemindsoncampus.org/chapters/definition.php>>.

The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2001. Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, Los Angeles, CA. February 1, 2006 <[http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/norms\\_pr\\_01.htm](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/norms_pr_01.htm)>.

Campus Blues.com. 2002-2004. ReconnectingU, Mashpee, MA. <<http://www.campusblues.com/>>.

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Duenwald, Mary. "The Dorms May Be Great, But How's the Counseling?" New York Times, October 26, 2004.

The George Washington University Health Resource Center - Publications - George Washington University, Washington D.C. <<http://www.heath.gwu.edu/resources.htm>>.

NAMI on Campus. <[http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=NAMI\\_on\\_Campus1](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=NAMI_on_Campus1)>.

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Sharpe, Michael N. et al. "The Emergence of Psychiatric Disabilities in Postsecondary Education." Vol. 3, Iss. 1. National Center on Secondary Education and Transition Institute on Community Integration. <<http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=1688>>.

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities. Washington, D.C. <<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>>.

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