Mental Health Fact Sheet

What can be defined as a mental health difficulty?

Mental health is not just the absence of mental illness. It is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (WHO, 2007). Mental illness can be defined as the experiencing of severe and distressing psychological symptoms to the extent that engagement in our day to day activities can be affected. Mental Health Difficulties include: Depression, Anxiety, Bi-Polar Disorder, Eating Disorder, OCD etc.

How can mental health difficulties impact a student's college experience?

Characteristics	Possible impact in College
1. Social Communication & Interaction	• Difficulties with **initiating interactions.** • Difficulties **seeking support, asking questions, or initiating interaction** with peers or staff due to low self-esteem and confidence. • Difficulties in socialising or dealing with other students • Difficulties with **non-verbal communication** such as use of eye contact. • Difficulties **developing and maintaining relationships** with peers and staff and **adapting to social situations** (thinking on the spot). • **Giving presentations and working in groups** can be particularly difficult and stressful for students with anxiety. • **Changes in social and daily routine can be stressful**, particularly as students first enter college after spending a long period in the same daily routine and social environment of a secondary school. **Transition into the college environment** can be difficult and very overwhelming.

2. Performance in class and exams	**Attendance can vary** as a student experiencing mental health difficulties or a 'low' periods may have a tendency to isolate or avoid overwhelming social and physical environments/situations. Varied attendance may also be as a result of high levels of anxiety and fatigue. **Difficulties seeing alternative perspectives** and understanding the reasoning for something if a student is prone to anxious or negative thinking. **Low attention span** due to condition or medication. - Some students with OCD may **have certain intense interests or behaviours** which may affect their ability to maintain concentration or engage with others in the class. - Difficulties with **organisation and time keeping**. - Difficulties with **meeting deadlines** due to feelings of inadequacy with regard to assessments. - Students may become overwhelmed when in the following environments: **Big lecture theatres/labs** with many distractions (people, lights, noises). **Noisy & crowded environments** (e.g. bus, moving between classes).
Other Characteristics	
Executive functioning (higher-thinking skills)	- Difficulties **managing multiple deadlines** in self-directed manner. - Difficulties with **time management and organisation.**
Central Coherence (seeing the 'big picture')	- Can get **caught up with small details,** presenting perfectionist traits**.** - Can find it difficult to **rationalise** and separate anxious/negative thoughts from reality.
Independent living skills	**Difficulty living away from home** for the first time and managing independently without level of support previously experienced. **Managing life skills** (e.g. cooking, cleaning, managing finances, transport etc.) on top of college work can be stressful. Often during periods of high anxiety or whilst experiencing a depressive episode, a student may neglect self-care, personal hygiene, nutritional intake, under/over exercising, rest and relaxation. **Motivation and interest levels** can vary due to effects of illness or medication.

How can you support students with mental health difficulties?

1. **Student-Centred Approach:**
   - If you are in doubt about how to support a student at any time, **ask the student** – they are the experts of their own needs!
   - Create a space for students to **feel comfortable approaching you** (e.g. provide contact and student office hour details etc.).
   - Implement any [classroom](#) and [exam](#) accommodations which were determined at the **student's Needs Assessment**.
   - Keep yourself informed and up-to-date with your Programme's, and the University's, [policy on managing emergency situations](#), and the [mental health and wellbeing policy.](#)

2. **Communication:**
   - Ask **one question at a time** and give them time to answer.
   - If necessary, offer alternative methods of contact, e.g. email.
   - Be **literal and explicit in your language** – anxious thoughts can lead to misinterpretation of statements/responses/feedback.
   - If a student looks anxious, **use non-verbal communication,** take a seat, soften voice, open hands, etc., create a more comfortable environment for the student.
   - Be aware that they **may find it difficult making eye contact** if particularly anxious.
   - Be aware of the **environment you are in** (is it noisy/crowded?).
   - Be **watchful for possible bullying** from other students.
   - Inform students about **college supports** (e.g. Maths Support Centre, Writing Support Centre, UCD Access and Lifelong Learning Centre, Student Counselling Service).
   - **Contacting students** to provide them with the work they have missed or just with some encouraging words can alleviate their anxiety about returning to class after a period of absence.
   - If possible, **complete mental health training** to become more familiar with how best to approach a student in an emergency situation (ASIST, Mental Health First Aid).
   - **Encourage** students to return to class if they have been absent.

3. **Teaching and Learning:**
   - Be guided by [Universal Design principles](#) when designing coursework.
   - Give **clear and explicit instructions on what is expected of them for assignments** and assessments, possibly providing an example of good work.
   - Many students are taking medication for their mental health difficulties. These medications can have a number of side-effects, most notably fatigue. Therefore, **try not to draw attention** to students who appear tired in class. Instead, using a varied approach to teaching can **help these students to stay alert** and engage with the material being covered.
   - Some students may be very uncomfortable with giving presentations. **Offering to listen to the presentation privately or allowing the student to complete an alternative assessment** can be very helpful.
   - **Provide slides/notes before class**. This can help students to focus on the material being presented. This is also helpful to those students who may not be able to attend class due to the difficulties they are experiencing.
   - Provide the opportunity for students to **discuss draft assignments**. This helps students to meet deadlines and increase their confidence in their work.
   - **Group work** can also be particularly difficult:
     - **Guide all students about how to effectively communicate** within a group.
     - Give students a **template which allows them to complete all steps** of the group work.
     - Spend some time with the groups to ensure they **start in a structured manner**.

Please see [UCD Student Help](#) for a list of all internal and external emergency contacts.

> **To find out more about mental health difficulties:**
> - https://jigsaw.ie/
> - https://turn2me.org/youth
> - www.mentalhealthireland.ie