



Mental Health Disorders Impacts on Academic Functioning

The most frequently occurring mental health disorders for students are mood and anxiety disorders, such as Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Additional disorders include Schizophrenia and Psychosis, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Eating Disorders, Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders, and Personality Disorders, all of which may present in isolation or comorbid with another disorder. Students can struggle throughout their entire post-secondary schooling with their mental health difficulties, or they may experience episodes at different times throughout their studies. The degree to which academics are affected by mental health disorders varies considerably and can depend on many factors, including treatment, environment, self-care, social supports, time of year (i.e., exam periods, holidays), and stress levels.

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders involve extreme fear or worry associated with real or perceived threats. Symptoms can include catastrophic thinking, fear of impending disaster, challenges focusing/processing information, difficulties falling asleep, discrete episodes of panic (difficulty breathing, rapid heart rate, sweating), and avoidance behaviours. There are numerous subtypes of anxiety disorders including Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Panic attacks involve discrete episodes of intense anxiety marked with physical symptoms such as difficulty breathing, rapid heart rate, sweating, etc. Students with social anxiety may find it difficult to attend class and participate in group activities. Generalized anxiety is often accompanied by upsetting thoughts and beliefs that hinder the ability to engage fully in learning and socializing. Anxiety disorders are typically managed with psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle management. For reference and further information, please visit the Mayo Clinic's information on [Anxiety](#).

Clinical Depression

Clinical depression is characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, emptiness, and/or irritability which significantly impact a person's ability to think and function and to participate in activities previously enjoyed. It often results in lethargy, lack of



motivation, and can affect a person's appetite, sleep pattern, engagement in activities, concentration, and productivity. These changes can affect the student's ability to focus during lectures and studying, can impact attendance, and can create problems when coping with stressful situations. Depression is typically managed with psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle management. For reference and further information, please visit the Mayo Clinic's information on [Depression](#).

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a mental health condition that causes extreme mood swings that include emotional highs (mania or hypomania) and lows (depression). When depressed, the disorder features feelings of sadness and hopelessness accompanied by loss of interest or pleasure in most activities. When the mood shifts to mania or hypomania (less extreme than mania), a person may feel euphoric, full of energy or unusually irritable. These mood swings can affect a student's sleep, energy, activity, judgment, ability to attend classes, and the ability to think clearly. Bipolar disorder is typically managed with psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle management. For reference and further information, please visit the Mayo Clinic's information on [Bipolar Disorder](#).

Schizophrenia and Psychosis

These often more serious mental health disorders often surface for the first time during post-secondary years. Students may report symptoms of paranoia or feeling disconnected from themselves, which can result in impairments in their ability to function. Treatment will consist of psychiatric care and access to regular supports such as counselling. It would not be atypical to require a brief leave of absence from studies in order to receive proper medical care. For reference and further information, please visit the Mayo Clinic's information on [Schizophrenia](#).

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) features a pattern of uncontrolled thoughts and fears (obsessions) that often lead to repetitive behaviors (compulsions). These obsessions and compulsions interfere with daily activities and cause significant distress. Intrusive thoughts and compulsions may affect a student's ability to focus



and efficiently complete academic tasks. Symptoms are often exacerbated by stress and thus may wax and wane in severity over the course of a semester. OCD can be managed with psychotherapy and medication, as well as specific skills training. For reference and further information, please visit the Mayo Clinic's information on [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder](#).

Trauma

Trauma alone does not constitute a mental health disorder. However, students who experience a trauma (i.e., assault, accident, witness a crime, etc.) are likely to experience acute distress for a period of time. This response can include difficulties with concentration, sleeping, and feeling numb. Thankfully, these symptoms often lessen over a period of weeks, but can linger long enough for students to be affected academically and require temporary accommodations. Some students do not show signs of distress immediately after a trauma but will develop symptoms later on. Those who do not improve within the period of a few months of onset would need to be assessed for possible Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and/or a mood or anxiety disorder. For reference and further information, please visit the Mayo Clinic's information on [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#).

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are a common health concern amongst post-secondary students and can occur in several forms. The three most prevalent eating disorders are Anorexia, Bulimia, and Binge Eating Disorder, which can occur singly or in combination with other mental health disorders. Students struggling with eating disorders can experience fatigue and have difficulty focusing on the material being presented. Sleep patterns are commonly affected. Depending on severity, school attendance can be disrupted by medical appointments, treatment, and/or side effects of the condition. If they are living in residence and have limited access to private eating spaces and selection of food, their condition can worsen. Eating disorders are often treated with psychotherapy and medication, as well as specific skills training. For reference and further information, please visit the Mayo Clinic's information on [Eating Disorders](#).



Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders

Addiction involves using a substance or engaging in a harmful behaviour as evidenced by intense craving, loss of control of amount or frequency of use, compulsion to use, and continued use despite repeated negative consequences. Some substances can impair focus and concentration, and also have a significant impact on overall motivation towards school. Students struggling with substance and/or behavioural addiction may experience difficulties attending classes, completing required academic activities, and managing their workload. Often these addictions are time-consuming, causing the student to struggle with prioritizing schoolwork over the addictive behaviour. The degree to which academics will be affected will vary considerably depending on the severity of the addiction and the resources that are utilized by the student. Treatment usually consists of regular counselling once the student is committed to recovery. Depending on the severity and stage of the addiction, the best course of action might be taking a semester off (without penalty) to get the help needed. For reference and further information, please visit the Centre of Addiction and Mental Health's information on [Addiction](#).

Personality Disorders

Personality disorders begin in adolescence and are characterized by a persistent difference in emotion regulation, self-concept, thinking/information processing, and interpersonal relationships. They cause significant distress or impairment in daily life. There are numerous subtypes of personality disorders including Borderline Personality Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder, Avoidant Personality Disorder, and Paranoid Personality Disorder to name a few. They can affect a student's ability to make lasting social connections, regulate emotions, separate relevant and irrelevant information, prioritize, and self-manage. They are persistent and are best managed with psychotherapy and medication, as well as specific skills training. For reference and further information, please visit the American Psychiatric Association's information on [Personality Disorders](#).