

## Mental Health Disorders Impacts on Academic Functioning

The most frequently occurring disorders for students are mood and anxiety disorders including depression, anxiety and Bipolar Disorder. Students can also present with psychiatric disorders such as Schizophrenia and Psychosis. Other students may suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, trauma, an eating disorder, addiction, personality disorders or a combination of mental health disorders. 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 feature intense behavioural responses to real or perceived threats (DSM-5). Symptoms can include catastrophic thinking, difficulty breathing, rapid heart rate, sweating, and a fear of impending disaster. There are numerous subtypes of anxiety disorders including Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Students with social anxiety may find it difficult to get to 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 impacts a person's ability to think and function and to participate in activities previously enjoyed. It often results in lethargy, slow processing speed, 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 cause difficulties in remembering information, can impact attendance, and 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 get 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 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 unreasonable thoughts and fears (obsessions) that often lead to repetitive behaviors (compulsions). These obsessions and compulsions interfere with daily activities and cause significant distress. OCD often leads to feelings of anxiety and distress which may amplify the repetitive behaviours, fueling a vicious cycle. Completing assignments during stressful periods can be challenging. 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 memory, 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 common 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. Often students struggling with eating disorders can experience fatigue and have difficulty with 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](#).

## Addiction

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 with focusing on material, class attendance, and completing assignments on time. Often these addictions are time-consuming, causing the student to struggle with prioritizing school work 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 needed help. 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 pattern of behaviour and inner experience that is much different than what is expected in one's culture. In addition, personality disorders cause significant distress or impairment in daily life. There are numerous subtypes of personality disorders including Borderline 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](#).