



## Teaching Students with Invisible Disabilities

Developed by Patricia Carlton and Jennifer Hertzfeld The Ohio State  
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Improving the Quality of Education for Students with Disabilities

### Introduction

Invisible disabilities are the most common type of disability among college students. For example, students with learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and/or psychiatric disabilities, may request accommodations even though they do not appear to have a disability. There are numerous other hidden or invisible disabilities such as a heart condition, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, and Seizure Disorder. It is also important to remember that the severity of functional limitations do not depend on your ability to see the disability.

There may be several students in your classroom with invisible disabilities. Of these students, only some will request accommodations. For those students who request accommodations, it is important to express your willingness to accommodate all types of disabilities and to be supportive of their accommodation requests. The student will provide verification of a documented disability by providing you with a disclosure form from University Disability Services (UDS).

### Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities often learn differently than their peers. Although they have average or above average intelligence, there is frequently a discrepancy between their ability and their achievement in specific areas due to a central nervous system dysfunction. A learning disability is a permanent disorder that interferes with integrating, acquiring, and/or demonstrating verbal or nonverbal abilities and skills. Frequently, there are some processing or memory deficits.

Each student with a learning disability may need different types of accommodations, services, and/or supports based on what area(s) of learning is affected by the disability. Students with learning disabilities may have difficulties with some of the following:

Reading comprehension	Processing speed	Written expression
Oral expression	Mathematics	Auditory processing
Visual processing	Abstract reasoning	Visual processing
Visual spatial skills	Processing speed	Visual spatial skills

Keep in mind that one individual does not have difficulty with all of the above-mentioned areas, just generally a few of those areas. Also, it is not unusual for a person with a learning disability to be gifted in some areas.

## Guidelines

**Exam Accommodations:** Assist students with a disability in arranging for appropriate exam accommodations whether you and the student arrange these accommodations yourselves or coordination is utilized with University Disability Services. Faculty will receive an email notification two in-session days prior to the exam date when a student has made an online exam request with the UDS office.

**Multi-modality Instruction:** Provide important information and assignments in both oral and written formats to help promote accessibility to course content. A multi-modality approach to instruction assists these students in finding a modality that is consistent with their learning strength.

**Alternative Format:** Coordinate with UDS to ensure that course materials will be available in alternative format. Some students with a disability need print material in alternative format. When you are contacted by the UDS or a student, it is important that you immediately provide information about the required textbook(s) and readings you will be using as well as any other reading expectations. It takes a considerable amount of time to convert materials into alternative format.

**Study Aids:** Provide study questions, study guides, and opportunities for questions and answers to help students review essential course content.

## **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity that is more frequent and severe than is typically observed in individuals at a comparable level of development (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV TR, 2000). Students with ADHD or ADD (without hyperactivity) may have difficulty with one or more of the following areas:

Concentration	Listening	Distractibility
Following directions	Organization	Sitting for lengthy periods
Completing tasks	Transitioning	Sedentary tasks like reading
Planning		

## Guidelines

**Assistance with Structure:** Provide a syllabus with clearly delineated expectations and due dates. Study guides, review sheets, and frequent opportunities for feedback are helpful in providing structure and organization.

**Exam Accommodations:** Assist students in arranging for appropriate exam accommodations with UDS. Many students with ADHD use exam accommodations including extended time and a distraction- reduced exam space.

**Access to Class Notes:** Students with ADHD/ADD have difficulty focusing and concentrating and for this reason may need access to classroom notes. Your assistance may be needed to ensure that they get notes if we are unable to locate a note taker through UDS.

**Classroom Distractions:** The student may choose to sit near the front of the class, away from doors, air conditioning units, windows, or any other possible sources of distraction.

## **Psychiatric Disability**

Students with psychiatric disabilities exhibit "... a persistent psychological disorder or psychiatric disorder, emotional or mental illness that adversely affects educational performance and/or functioning and frequently requires medication" (<http://disserv3.stu.umn.edu/AG-S/3-5.html>, 1999). Descriptions of certain types of psychiatric disorders follow:

**Depression** is a major disorder that can begin at any age. Major depression may be characterized by a depressed mood most of each day, a lack of pleasure in most activities, thoughts of suicide, insomnia, and feelings of worthlessness or guilt.

**Bipolar disorder** (manic depressive disorder) causes a person to experience periods of mania and depression. In the manic phase, a person might experience inflated self-esteem and a decreased need to sleep; however, in the depressive phase, a person may experience a lack of energy and less self-esteem and interest in family, friends, and school.

**Anxiety** disorders can disrupt a person's ability to concentrate and cause hyperventilation, a racing heart, chest pains, dizziness, panic, and extreme fear. Examples of anxiety disorders include panic disorder, simple phobias, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

**Schizophrenia** can cause a person to experience delusions and hallucinations in addition to depressed mood and flat affect.

In most situations you will not be aware that you have a student with a psychiatric disability in your classroom because the symptoms are not as visible as other more recognizable disabilities. Many students with a psychiatric disability are fearful of and have faced stigmatization because of their disability. Some students do not need or request any accommodations, and some require a variety of accommodations. For some, the disability is temporary; for others, it is chronic. With medication and/or therapy, people with psychiatric disabilities may learn to manage their symptoms.

## **Guidelines**

**Exam Accommodations:** Assist students in arranging for exam accommodations when requested. The exam accommodations that they will most likely use are a distraction reduced exam space and extra time.

**Make-up Work:** Collaborate with students about arrangements to make up tests and other assignments, allowing them extra time since students with a psychiatric disability may miss class during serious episodes.

**Welcoming and Supportive Environment:** Many students with psychiatric disabilities fear stigmatization because of their disability so if a student shares his/her disability with you, be supportive and welcoming when a student requests assistance in arranging for accommodations.

## **Resources**

University of Minnesota Disability Services Website: <http://disserv3.stu.umn.edu/AG-S/3-5.html> The Ohio State

University Partnership Grant Website: <http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg>

The Ohio State University Office for Disability Services (ODS) Website: <http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/> The Ohio State

University Web Accessibility Center Website: <http://www.wac.ohio-state.edu/>

The Ohio State University Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator's Office Website: <http://ada.osu.edu/>

American Psychiatric Association, (2000). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 4th edition, Text Revised. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

## **Important Note**

This information is available in alternate format upon request. Please call University Disability Services at 570-389-4491.

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