## MENTAL HEALTH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Many students in colleges and universities today have many different kinds of psychological disorders for which they may, or may not, be seeking treatment. With the proper education and training of staff members about psychological disorders and the medications used to treat them, staff members will have more confidence when trying to help someone with a disorder and subsequently, the stigma surrounding mental illness may begin to be alleviated within the residence halls.

#### **Understanding Mental Health Disorders**

More and more young adults are entering into college today diagnosed with many different psychological disorders. These students may or may not be taking prescribed psychotropic medications, which subsequently can cause unique challenges for residence life staff members. This article will give a brief introduction to the nature of some of the typical psychological disorders encountered within the residence halls. Some basic tips will be included for helping students who have psychological disorders.

Mental disorders are defined and classified by the American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, typically known as the DSM-IV (the "IV" indicates the version of the manual.) The DSM-IV defines a mental disorder as a "clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress...or disability...or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom" (p. xxi).

The Surgeon General's Report of Mental Health defines mental disorders as "health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning."

These disorders are placed into 17 different classifications in the DSM-IV depending upon the types of symptoms experienced. These classifications include mood, anxiety, eating, adjustment, and personality disorders to name just a few. Within these classifications, there are many different types of disorders. For example, there are three different types of eating disorders, which include anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

To be diagnosed with a specific disorder, you must fulfill certain symptomatic criteria, which is listed in the DSM-IV. If someone isn't experiencing any and/or all of the symptoms listed, they probably don't have that particular disorder. Please note that there are many subtleties with different criteria so only trained mental health professionals should make diagnoses.

#### **Mental Health Disorders Encountered**

Students today come to colleges and universities diagnosed (and even undiagnosed) with the full range of mental disorders, including everything from Schizophrenia and Anorexia to Major Depression and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In a recent study by Dr. Ronald Kessler from Harvard University, it was found that **37% of people aged 15-24 years old have a diagnosable mental illness**. Most of college students today fit within this age bracket.

It is also very prevalent for someone to have more than one type of disorder at any one time. This is what is referred to as "comorbidity." A student could be diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder as well as Anorexia Nervosa. Another example would include a student diagnosed with Alcohol Dependence as well as an anxiety disorder.

Also, some of the presenting symptoms in some students may be more severe than others. Furthermore, some students may be seeking treatment for these symptoms while others may not.

Understand that each school's student population is completely different so staff members at one school may encounter more and different types of disorders than their counterparts at other schools.

### **Tips for Helping Students**

- You should never attempt to diagnose a student. If you see a student who appears to be in crisis, speak with your RD/other Residence Life supervisor about this individual and work together to determine an appropriate course of intervention.
- Be careful not able to label someone with "eccentric" behaviors as someone who has a psychological disorder. Just because a student acts differently than the group doesn't necessarily mean that they have a mental illness. Maybe that's just the way they are and that's okay!
- Use language carefully while interacting with your residents. Words such as "crazy," "nuts", and "weird" have no place for inviting students with disorders into the residence hall community.
- Know the campus and community resources; know your limits; and know when to refer students!

### Conclusion

Many students in colleges and universities today have many different kinds of psychological disorders for which they may, or may not, be seeking treatment. While the goal of this article is to help you begin to understand the issue, it is also of critical importance that you understand your limitations. As an R.A you are very in tune to the behaviors and personalities of your residents, and you play a critical role in their well being.

# GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the most prevalent mental disorders and the number of adult Americans, aged 18 and over, diagnosed with them in a given year are:

Major Depressive Disorder: 9.9 million

Disorder: 40.0 million

Disorder:

Dysthymic Disorder: 10.9 million

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: 5.5 million

Social Phobia: 5.3 million

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: 4.0 million
 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: 3.3 million

Panic Disorder: 2.4 million
Bipolar Disorder: 2.3 million
Schizophrenia: 2.2 million

- Personality Disorders: 30.8 Million American adults (14.8%) meet standard criteria for (at least) one personality disorder.
- Eating disorders affect 5-10 million women and 1 million men, with the highest rates occurring in college-aged women.
- Suicide was the third leading cause of death for those aged 15-24, and the second leading killer in the college
  population in 1998.
- More than 30% of college freshman report feeling overwhelmed a great deal of the time. About 38% of college women report feeling frequently overwhelmed.

Given the previous statistics, it is understandable that a residence life staff member may encounter a student presenting symptoms of a mood or anxiety disorder. The symptoms for each of these types of disorders are very unique and can be readily treated with proper medication and psychotherapy.

Examples of mental health disorders seen on campus include:

Anxiety Disorders Mood Disorders Personality Disorders

Learning Disorders Eating Disorders