Teaching students with psychological disabilities

General Information

Students with psychological disorders can experience a variety of difficulties including: problems with sustained concentration, inappropriate affect, poor social skills, restless, poor impulse control, and/or excessive anxiety. While these students may function adequately on a day to day basis, the impact on their learning is often seen in short term memory deficits, inconsistent academic performance, and excessive absences due to hospitalizations or medication changes. Commonly associated disorders include: clinical depression or other mood disorders, phobias or other anxiety disorders, attention deficits, compulsivity, and head trauma.

While each instructor knows the demands of his/her own class, the following questions may be considered so that classroom information is accessible to the student:

- Does the student participate in class discussions and articulate well but respond poorly on a written test? In what ways can I make sure that I am testing the knowledge of the student accurately?
- Does the student misinterpret or have difficulty understanding my tone of voice or body language, which may help emphasize key points?
- Does the student appear to be anxious, apathetic, restless, fatigue easily and so on? When does this seem to occur?
- Does the student talk out of turn, speak loudly or rudely, stand too close, or interrupt conversations? When should I overlook this and when is it necessary to deal with it when classroom instruction is disrupted?
- Does the stress of taking a test seem to cause the student difficulty in comprehension?

Suggestions for Communication

- Most people with disabilities do not mind talking frankly about the disability. Understanding and awareness of the facts promotes acceptance and integration.
- When speaking with students with psychological disorders, use an assertive, non-threateningly communication style. You may need to clarify understanding by asking the student to repeat.
- Student with psychological disorders frequently do not recognize their own behaviors. When possible, ignore inappropriate behavior. Reinforce positive behavior with compliments or other appropriate feedback.
- To assist the student in organization and from feeling overwhelmed, maintain focus by dealing with one issue at a time.
- Interpret psychological motivations for behavior cautiously.

Academic Considerations

- Use supplementary text materials and a variety of presentation formats to reinforce or emphasize important points.
- When inappropriate behavior is noticed, signal student in a non-threatening manner or ask for a private conference in order to discuss class behavior.
- Allow the use of a note taker or tape recorder in class.
- As some students show poor concentration, an alternate testing location free of distractions may be appropriate.
- To assist the student in organization and from feeling overwhelmed, allow for frequent deadlines or break tasks into smaller components.
- Consider being available for weekly meetings for feedback on academic performance or encourage student to utilize on campus support services.
- Assist the student in establishing a study schedule.

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