

*Beyond discrimination,  
beyond special treatment*

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**TOWARDS A BETTER  
UNDERSTANDING OF  
STUDENTS WITH A  
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM**

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## INTRODUCTION

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This brochure is primarily intended for teachers, but is also for anyone likely to work with students who have a mental health problem.

Our goal is to identify the potential challenges faced by these students and suggest the attitudes most likely to be helpful.

Therefore, we hope that the content of this document can help teachers in their work and facilitate the integration of this clientele into the college community. The sooner the institution is notified, the better the chances of putting in place accommodations and services in keeping with their doctor's evaluation or the medical certificate and the student's needs.

The person in charge of the **Special Needs Services**<sup>1</sup> must always consider how the limitation will affect the student's learning process. For this reason, a one-on-one interview will be held with students in order to get to know them, understand their needs and clarify with them the services they will need to alleviate the effects of their disability.

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## MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

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Students with a mental health problem must provide a medical certificate in order to register with the Special Needs Services. These students can have a satisfactory life and make achievements if they have a specific diagnosis, treatment with medication, regular check-ups, a support network and measures, sufficient income, appropriate housing and a life project.

No one really knows what exactly causes mental health problems, but research has shown they are associated with a chemical imbalance in the brain. Various factors have been identified as playing a possible role in causing or triggering the development of a mental health problem. For example, genetic factors increase a person's risk of developing a problem, while severe or prolonged stress also seems to play a role. Even though we do not know whether stress can truly cause a mental health problem, we know that it can be a trigger or aggravator.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the cégep's service catering to students with Special Needs. If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep's reality.

## **Some brief diagnoses**

### ***Depression***

Depression is the most common mood disorder. A depressed person feels “very sad or desperate”. Symptoms include a feeling of powerlessness, a change in eating habits, restless sleep, a permanent state of fatigue, the inability to experience pleasures, and thoughts about death or suicide.

### ***Manic depression (bipolar disorder)***

Manic depression, also known as bipolar disorder, is an illness characterized by mood swings alternating between depressive and manic episodes. These episodes can vary in intensity and have a significant impact on the person’s overall functioning.

### ***Anxiety disorder***

Persons with anxiety disorder have intense, prolonged feelings of fright and distress for no obvious reason. Their daily life is marked by malaise and fear that can adversely affect their functioning. Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health problems.

### ***Panic disorder***

This disorder is characterized by repeated panic attacks that occur for no obvious reason. These attacks happen quickly and reach their peak just as quickly (usually in less than 10 minutes). They are also accompanied by a feeling of imminent danger and a desire to flee. Persons with panic disorder live in fear of having a new attack, and may also worry about the consequences of an attack (losing self-control, having a heart attack, going crazy). Some persons, in reaction to these attacks, decide to drop out of school.

### ***Schizophrenia***

Schizophrenia is characterized by signs of mental dissociation, inappropriate affect and incoherent delusions, which generally leads to breaking contact with the outside world and sometimes autistic withdrawal. Schizophrenic persons can go through episodes of paranoia of varying intensity. It is very rare for these persons to be a threat to others, since they are generally lonely and unassuming.

### ***Borderline personality disorder***

Persons living with borderline personality disorder have disturbed emotions and behaviour that can sometimes seem excessive, childish or immature. They have a tendency to react more intensely than others to lower stress levels. Relations with a person suffering from borderline personality disorder can be extremely chaotic on account of their “emotional storms,” sudden mood swings and impulsiveness.

## ***Personality disorders***

These persons display behaviours that deviate from those expected in society. Personality disorders are defined by characteristics commonly called personality traits, which include mistrust, perfectionism, detachment from social relations, bizarre beliefs, impulsiveness, etc. Personality traits must be rigid and inappropriate to be considered as criteria for a personality disorder diagnosis.

## ***Anorexia and bulimia***

Anorexia and bulimia are eating disorders. Anorexia involves starving oneself, while bulimia consists of binge eating. Eating disorders are always the consequence of distress, trauma or a profound disquiet. They significantly disrupt the person's overall functioning.

## **Consequences on learning**

- Difficulty concentrating;
- Difficulty paying attention over a long period of time;
- Memory problems;
- Organization problems;
- Decreased enthusiasm;
- Trouble clearly expressing ideas;
- Sluggishness;
- Fatigue;
- Difficulty establishing or maintaining satisfactory social relations;
- Difficulty dealing with everyday problems;
- Unstable mood;
- Impulsiveness;
- Suicidal thoughts.

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## **TEACHING STRATEGIES**

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### **Attitudes to adopt**

We should keep in mind that one of the goals of education is to promote student independence. Cégep is the place where students should be able to make use of this skill. Generally speaking, when students have access to and **use** all the necessary resources, their performance will be similar to that of other students.

### **Support**

Teachers who have students with a mental health problem in their class can expect to invest more time and energy in adapting their course and exams to meet the needs of

these students, and to guide and support them, when needed. Support can also involve short-, medium- and long-term planning if students have a setback, an attack, are hospitalized or have their medication dose adjusted. You will be informed of this.

### ***Role of teachers***

- Support should never involve repeating a course;
- Support involves clarifying certain points, obtaining additional explanations or discussing specific arrangements to make, such as adapting exams.

Note: It is very rare that students with a mental health problem agree to having the disorder revealed in the information letter given to teachers at the beginning of the semester. Out of respect for students who do not want to be identified, the Special Needs Services **resource person**<sup>2</sup> will indicate “health problem”, without specifying its nature. Nevertheless, some problems can be mentioned to justify the needs indicated. Teachers can meet with students to discuss the support measures put into place, and we encourage you to contact the Special Needs Services **counsellor**<sup>3</sup> at any time for more information.

### ***Role of resource persons***

#### *Academic support*

- Assist in reviewing material presented in class (brief overview);
- Help plan assignments and exams and manage study time;
- Provide assistance in understanding instructions;
- Perform any other intervention, as required;
- Follow up with teachers;
- Promote the optimal development of students through personalized activities;
- Establish services for students and ensure that these are delivered appropriately.

### **Evaluation: exams and assignments**

Exams are situations in which adaptations are necessary, given the anxiety they cause. Therefore, it is very important to keep close ties with the student and the Special Needs Services.

#### *Written exam*

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<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the person who provides academic guidance to students with disabilities (French *intervenant*). If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep’s reality.

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: This generic term is being used throughout the text to designate the person at the Special Needs Services who is responsible for welcoming and integrating students with disabilities (including arranging for services to facilitate their studies) (French *répondant*). If necessary, please change throughout text to suit your cégep’s reality.

Some students are more anxious or have problems with attention, concentration or organization. If such is the case, short-answer exams may be more appropriate than essays. However, this type of exam should also be offered to the other students.

To promote formative evaluation, it is best to comment on the exams and assignments of students with a mental health problem.

Your feedback and comments are important to help them progress. This also serves as an excellent way to communicate with shyer students and invite them to ask for additional explanations, if need be.

## **Time factor**

Given that students with a mental health problem sometimes require more time to complete exams, it has become standard practice to offer:

- **50 per cent more time** for essay writing in class or during exams (lengthy text or lengthy reading before class). No additional time is required for written assignments with long deadlines.

In certain particular cases, the additional time for the in-class exam can be further extended. Teachers are **advised** to talk to students and the resource person about exams and possible accommodations (time, day and location) before the beginning of the semester. They are usually good resources for creating accommodations.

Finally, the Special Needs Services team is always available to teachers to provide information about assignments, exams, adapted rooms and sound productions (cassettes, MP3s).

## **Academic standards**

When considering changes to an evaluation process, academic standards should not be included. This is to ensure that exam results are valid and comparable to those of the other students in the course.

**Students with a mental health problem have the same right as all other students to experience failure as a driver of personal growth.**

## **Teamwork**

Certain disciplines often require teamwork. In this respect, teachers can play a fundamental role:

- They can gradually encourage students to participate and find a suitable role or responsibility for them.
- They can act as a link between students and a team of open-minded classmates, who agree to work with them. However, students will be required to work and abide by the same rules as the other students, without being carried by the team. Overprotecting these students should be avoided.
- In some cases, it is best to **avoid teamwork, since the anxiety experienced** by students in social situations may lead to a setback that could compromise their

academic performance and that of the others. In this case, the resource person will inform the teacher.

### **Internships and field trips**

Supplementary classroom activities serve to promote student independence and initiate them to the workplace. Internships are excellent opportunities for all students to understand the requirements of their chosen careers. The same principles outlined for teamwork and labs also apply to the context of internships and field trips.

Teachers should consult the resource person and those responsible for the internship sites and field trips to obtain information about the available resources.

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## **SOME COURSES OF ACTION**

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### **Attitudes to adopt**

- Be as discreet as possible in your contact with students in order to respect their wish to not be identified.
- Clearly set out the expectations of each party at the beginning of the semester and repeat them as needed (time allotted for meetings, content of meetings, respect, attitude in class, etc.).
- Treat students with a mental health problem the same as others and expect the same of them, while taking into account their difficulties.
- Be vigilant and do not give in to manipulation from students trying to obtain preferential treatment or to use their mental health problem as an excuse for their performance.
- Openly discuss the problem with students to foster interactions that can lead to finding constructive ways to act given the differences.
- Always keep in mind that the goals are to help them integrate socially and support their learning. It is important to guide students toward overcoming their difficulties.
- Respect students' rate of progress and their ability to adapt to new situations.

### **Technical support**

- Carry out multi-sensory activities.
- Establish with them realistic objectives and short-term priorities.
- Through encouragement and personal support, promote the pursuit of their studies.
- Help students make connections or associations to make memorization easier.
- Try to link new learning with prior knowledge. Explain how the new knowledge will be useful.
- Progress from the most basic to the most complex, from concrete to abstract and from one element to many.



- Ask students to use an agenda or journal. The Special Needs Services resource person will show them how to use it.
- Encourage students to express themselves through words or other means. Do not pretend to understand if you did not. This will lead to frustration and a tendency to withdraw.
- Give important information in a clear manner. For example, cancellation of a class, details of an assignment, etc. should be communicated in writing or written on the board.
- Repeat and emphasize important information and instructions.
- Allow them to use various appropriate technical devices, such as a variable speed recorder, laptop computer, etc.

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## CONCLUSION

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The Special Needs Services aims to implement support measures to allow persons with diagnosed and treated mental health problems to pursue post-secondary studies or to re-enter college.

We have noticed that society tends to recognize the specific needs of this clientele, and thus to offer services to facilitate their integration. A school environment gives these persons a regular, normalizing place in which to evolve, which promotes better self-esteem and an opportunity to look to the future with hope.

We hope that this brochure has helped you gain insight into the multi-faceted and difficult reality of students with a mental health problem, and that the information it contains will guide and facilitate the assistance you provide them.

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