



Hints for working with staff and students with mental illness

The following strategies may be useful for working effectively with staff and students who have mental health conditions.

1. Promote a positive view of mental illness

People who have mental health conditions may have experienced discrimination that could have left them feeling worried and unsure about you or your reaction to them. Promoting a positive view of mental health issues in publicity material, and using language that is not discriminatory or judgmental, may help those affected feel more at ease.

2. Do not make assumptions about the impact of mental health issues on people's skills and abilities

Mental health illnesses can range from mild to severe and can be temporary, sporadic or chronic. No two people, including those with the same type of illness, will be affected in an identical way. The individual affected will usually be the best person to judge any impact the illness may have. By encouraging each person to find creative solutions to possible barriers and set their own limits, you can play a valuable role in assisting staff and students to balance their lives.

3. Prepare yourself for the work to be done

Be aware of the impact of mental illness on staff and students and the practical issues they face. Consider whether you are equipped to advise about confidentiality, legislation which affects people with mental health illnesses such as the Disability Discrimination Act, the concept of "reasonable adjustments", how and when to disclose mental health issues, and organisations which provide support for people with mental health difficulties.

4. Take time to establish a relationship

Consider ways to help staff and students feel at ease by perhaps allowing more

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time than usual to settle in, or structuring your discussions to start and end on a “neutral” topic.

5. Use active listening skills

Try to be sensitive to, and prepared to follow up where appropriate, any clues or leads on mental illness, both verbal and non-verbal, that individuals may provide. Offering encouragement, reassurance, positive support and resourcefulness whilst summarising and reinforcing the key issues can be helpful.

6. Clarify expectations of the person

Some people who are anxious or have mental health difficulties may find making decisions difficult, but it is important that you aim to enable and encourage staff and students to have control over their lives. Establishing clear aims and achievable targets is important. Be careful not to allow staff and students to become reliant or dependent on you.

7. Keep to the boundaries of your role

Be careful to adhere to the boundaries of your role and, if necessary, proactively guide a discussion in order to do this. Remember, it is not your role to attempt to resolve a person’s mental health difficulties. It is your role to build student capabilities required for graduate success or manage and support staff to undertake their duties.

8. Look after yourself

You may find it useful to reflect personally or debrief with colleagues. Think about areas that you felt were productive as well as identifying aspects that were difficult.

9. Refer

Be aware of appropriate specialist referral options. Deakin Counselling Service offers free confidential psychological support to staff and students. Counsellors will work with people to understand and manage issues and provide short term psychological support. For further information and support for students, go to deakin.edu.au/studentlife/counselling or phone 9244 6300.

Services and information are available for people experiencing a personal or community crisis through Lifeline. For further information and assistance, go to www.lifeline.org.au or call on 13 11 14.

For further information and support for students and staff with disability, contact the Equity and Diversity Unit on drcentre@deakin.edu.au or phone 03 924 46255.



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