

BARRIERS TO TEACHING & LEARNING



Mental Health

Mental health—it's how you think, feel, and act in order to face everyday life. It includes things like handling stress, relating to others, and making decisions. Everyone has mental health, ranging from good to fair to poor. Affected both by one's biology and by environment, every person's mental health may fluctuate, with some times being healthier than other times. Life will present nearly every human with tough situations or challenges at some point that require us to reach out to someone for some kind of support.

At those times when clusters of symptoms are recognizable as a diagnosis, it is called a mental health disorder. Physical disorders are also diagnosed by their cluster of symptoms, such as the flu, diabetes or heart disease. Like physical disorders, mental health disorders are relatively common. In fact, at least one in five children, and one in four adults, has a diagnosable mental health disorder at any given time.

Sometimes, like the flu, a mental health disorder will resolve with minor intervention or support in an otherwise healthy person. Other times, like with diabetes, if a mental health disorder is left unrecognized, untreated, or under-treated the effects can be quite harmful and cause additional complications. Finally, some disorders can be potentially life-threatening. Just as with physical conditions, mental health disorders can be singular, episodic, or chronic.

Barriers to Teaching

With misinformation or the incorrect tools to meet challenges and reach our goals, we are apt to become frustrated or burned out. Educators have often been left in the dark about mental health and its impact on learning. Most teacher education programs provide little formal training or tools regarding this topic. Each educator is left on their own and yet expected to reach and teach students whose learning is compromised in ways we often don't recognize or understand. This creates a substantial barrier to educators being able to do the thing they love: to teach.

Because mental health has a cognitive component, we have frequently in the past misunderstood disorders as "controllable" and therefore self-chosen. This misinformation reinforces ineffective approaches with students and damages the relationship between teacher and student, both of which create barriers to teaching.

Science is showing that the reality of mental health is a far more complex interplay, involving distinct parts of the brain and biology that process information quite differently. Educators deserve to have the knowledge, tools, techniques and support systems in place that enable them to promote access to learning potential and maximize their ability to teach.

A critical tool toward eliminating barriers to teaching is to recognize early on the possibility of a mental health issue for the student of concern, fill out the mental health checklist, and bring it to your building's mental health professional.

Barriers to Learning

Social, emotional or mental health difficulties can present barriers to students being available or able to learn at any given time.

Stressors a child or teen is experiencing, symptoms of an underlying mental health disorder, or side effects of medication, all have physiological and psychological effects that can significantly impact daily living and learning. Here are some of the ways that stress, social or emotional difficulties, and mental health disorders can create barriers to students being able to effectively learn:

Memory, concentration and organization

Difficulties with memory and concentration are common consequences both of stress and of many mental health disorders. This is because stress activates the human body's 'fight, flight or freeze' mechanism, which increases blood flow to the limbic brain (emotional centers) and decreases flow to the frontal lobes which are critical for academic learning and rational decision-making.

Researchers have found that mild stress activates an enzyme in the brain that impairs cognition, resulting in disturbed thinking, impaired judgment, impulsivity, and distractibility. This same enzyme produces a reduction in memory-related cell firing, the mechanism for short-term memory. Long-term stress can change the structure of the brain as well as decrease the size of the hippocampus, which is also critical for memory and mood.

This can have a big impact on both academic learning and the ability to keep appointments and meet deadlines. Students with these difficulties may not understand what is required of them. Difficulties with organization are likely to adversely affect time management and planning.

Sleep problems and fatigue

Problems in these areas can seriously affect attendance and punctuality, particularly for the early morning. These problems can impact alertness and attention in class, and the ability to stay awake. They can also impact stamina and the ability to meet challenging deadlines or complete complex or large tasks. Sleep problems and fatigue are common consequences of stress and many mental health disorders.

Difficult-to-manage symptoms

Difficult-to-manage mental health symptoms include anxiety and panic, disorientation, extreme emotions such as sadness or elation, and in rarer cases, altered perception such as hearing voices. Unmanageable symptoms may cause major problems with attendance. Students coping with distress and mood swings may feel 'unsafe' and unable to cope with appearing in public or in social situations involving people outside their 'safe' social network. Students may require time away from school for doctor or therapy appointments to help them learn to better manage symptoms – it is not always possible to fit these around the school timetable. But if they are unable to increase their management skills, a student's cognitive brain centers are not as available for academic learning.

Unrealistic or inappropriate expectations

In absence of training and tools for dealing with social, emotional and psychological development, adults can have unrealistic expectations about the capacities and capabilities of people who are under extreme or chronic stress, or who have an active mental health disorder. Just as it takes time to learn to read, water ski, or any other skill, it will take time to learn and integrate new coping skills, behaviors and ways of thinking. Consistency across settings, support and encouragement, repetition and practice are just as important in mental health treatment as in any other learning situation.

Many people under stress or who have mental health difficulties may also have unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of themselves and others. They may find it difficult to see the 'big picture' or to make rational decisions about what is required from them, which may lead to difficulties in setting achievable goals. This can also impact their use of the support strategies that are available to them.

Social difficulties

Many students under stress or who have mental health difficulties have problems communicating with others, making friends and sustaining relationships, and may not behave appropriately in social contexts. As a consequence they can feel isolated from their peers and very lonely. These problems can also present a huge barrier to learning, since effective communication of ideas and group or team work are an essential part of academic life.

There are now very effective ways to minimize the disruption to a child's development and achieve better outcomes if we recognize the 'red flags' for mental health problems and intervene early and adequately with the right type of treatment.

Sources

Mental health definition adapted from SAMHSA material

Barriers to Teaching & Learning adapted from www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/inclusive-teaching/recognising-barriers-mental-health-difficulties.php

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