IL Conversation

August 6, 2015

# What is a Psychiatric Disability?

By "disability," we mean "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual…." ADA Sec. 3. However, psychiatric disability is harder to define. Some attempts are set out below.

## [**Psychiatric Disabilities - Johns Hopkins University**](http://web.jhu.edu/disabilities/faculty/types_of_disabilities/psychiatric.html)

**Psychiatric disabilities** refer to a wide range of behavioral and/or **psychological** problems characterized by anxiety, mood swings, depression, and/or a compromised assessment of reality. These behaviors persist over time; they are not in response to a particular event.

web.jhu.edu/**disabilities**/...**disabilities**/**psychiatric**.h...

Johns Hopkins University

## [**Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation**](http://web.jhu.edu/disabilities/faculty/types_of_disabilities/psychiatric.html)

**Definition of Mental Illness and Some Common Diagnoses\***

Mental illness is a term that describes a broad range of mental and emotional conditions. Mental illness also refers to one portion of the broader ADA term mental impairment, and is different from other covered mental impairments such as mental retardation, organic brain damage, and learning disabilities. The term ‘psychiatric disability’ is used when mental illness significantly interferes with the performance of major life activities, such as learning, working and communicating, among others.

Someone can experience a mental illness over many years. The type, intensity and duration of symptoms vary from person to person. They come and go and do not always follow a regular pattern, making it difficult to predict when symptoms and functioning will flare-up, even if treatment recommendations are followed. The symptoms of mental illness often are effectively controlled through medication and/or psychotherapy, and may even go into remission. For some people, the illness continues to cause periodic episodes that require treatment. Consequently, some people with mental illness will need no support, others may need only occasional support, and still others may require more substantial, ongoing support to maintain their productivity.

The most common forms of mental illness are [**anxiety disorders**](http://cpr.bu.edu/resources/reasonable-accommodations/what-is-psychiatric-disability-and-mental-illness#anxiety), [**mood disorders**](http://cpr.bu.edu/resources/reasonable-accommodations/what-is-psychiatric-disability-and-mental-illness#mood), and [**schizophrenia disorders**](http://cpr.bu.edu/resources/reasonable-accommodations/what-is-psychiatric-disability-and-mental-illness#schizophrenia). Brief introductory information about these conditions is presented in this section for educational purposes only.

## California Courts

www.courts.ca.gov/partners/documents/psych\_dis.pdf

Psychiatric Disabilities Psychiatric disabilities cover a wide range of conditions, including eating disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, and other psychiatric conditions. Psychiatric disabilities are very common. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that as many as 1 in 4 adults in the United States will suffer from a diagnosable psychiatric condition in any given year. Being in a college environment can be helpful to students with psychiatric disabilities as it often provides a structure and routine that aids students in the recovery process. Many psychological conditions are treated using a combination of medication, therapy, and support. Because of the social stigma that often accompanies psychiatric disabilities, students may be reluctant to disclose their needs for accommodations. Some of the causes of psychiatric disabilities are trauma, biochemical imbalances, differences in brain structure, highly stressful life experiences, and other genetic, biological, and social factors. While it likely takes a combination of several of these factors to produce a serious psychological disability, researchers are still working to discover specific causes of these conditions.

The disorders most commonly experienced by students at Southern include:

• Anxiety / Panic Disorders • Depressive Disorders • Eating Disorders • Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders • Personality Disorders • Post Traumatic Stress Disorders • Schizophrenia and Schizoaffective Disorder • Substance Abuse

Common Psychiatric Disorders, Psychiatric or emotional disabilities are often viewed differently from other disabilities. Individuals with psychiatric disabilities are frequently blamed for their condition. However, students with emotional or psychological disorders have no more control over their conditions than do students with physical or sensory impairments, learning disabilities, or other chronic health conditions.

## [University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign](http://web.jhu.edu/disabilities/faculty/types_of_disabilities/psychiatric.html)

College of Applied Health Sciences, Division of Disability Resources & Educational Services

Students with psychiatric disabilities experience significant emotional difficulty that may or may not have required treatment in a hospital. With appropriate treatment, often combining medications, psychotherapy, and support, the majority of psychiatric disorders are cured or controlled.

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that many people in the United States have some form of psychiatric disorder. However, only one in five persons with a diagnosable psychiatric disorder ever seeks treatment due to the strong stigmatization involved. It is important to note that not all psychiatric disorders identified in the DSM-IV are "disabilities" as defined by the ADA and Section 504.

## Recovery Movement, IL and Rehabilitation/Medical Models Compared

Adapted from DeJong, Independent Living: From Social Movement to Analytic Paradigm (1979)

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|  | **Rehabilitation** | **Independent Living** | **Recovery** |
| **Definition of Problem** | Impairment/Lack of skill | Dependence on professionals, etc. | Trauma, Extreme emotional distress |
| **Locus of Problem** | In Individual | In the environment, Rehabilitation process | In the environment, people causing trauma |
| **Solution/ Supports** | Professional intervention | Peer counseling, advocacy, self-help, consumer control & barrier removal | Move from clinical to Life Coaches & peer support |
| **Self-help Centers** |  | Independent Living Centers | Consumer-run Recovery Centers |
| **Identity/Social Role** | Patient/client/diagnosis | Consumer (person first not disability) | May be peer, consumer, survivor, ex-patient (Person first not disability) |
| **Locus of Control/ Advocacy** | Doctor/Other professional | Consumer (Nothing about us without us) | Person (Nothing about us without us) |
| **Principles** | Follow treatment plan | Consumer-control & Choice | Self-determination & Choice |
| **Desired Outcome** | Rehabilitation (Maximum ADLs, Gainful employment) | Independent Living | Recovery |