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Important notice:

- This fact sheet is provided for the exclusive use of all the people involved in teaching at EPFL (hereafter “teaching staff”) and is not meant to be transmitted to students. Any use outside of this context, any distribution or publication, even partial, is prohibited.
- The goal of this fact sheet is to provide information to facilitate the interaction between EPFL teaching staff and EPFL students with disabilities.
- Teaching staff are free to apply this information according to their teaching context and the learning objectives to be achieved and as long as these measures do not create an advantage for students with disabilities.
- This fact sheet does not invalidate the study arrangements which have been granted by the special needs Commission to students with a disability.

Mental disorders and their cognitive impact

1. Description of the disability

The majority of mental disorders (75%) are diagnosed before the age of 25. Students, due to the environment they live in (multiple stress factors) and their age range, are vulnerable to these types of disorders, with an annual 9-18% incidence of depressive disorders and a 10-16% incidence of anxiety disorders. 30% of students with one type of mental disorder are also affected by at least another type of mental disorder (comorbidity). Mental disorders and/or the treatments used to cure them can have an impact on cognitive functions.

Cognitive functions refer to our internal mental processes that allow us to: communicate, concentrate, perceive the surrounding environment, handle information, acquire knowledge and remember events. When these functions are analyzed during a neuropsychological assessment, it is customary to analyze them by category: oral language, written language, calculus, praxis, visual gnosis, visuospatial function, memory, executive functions, attention.

Teaching staff can be confronted with three different situations linked to students’ mental disorders.

1. Acute mental disorder, without medical treatment
2. Acute mental disorder, with medical treatment
3. Acute long-term mental disorder, with medical treatment, known cognitive impact

For people in the first category (1), it is important to notice the signs of students in distress and advise them to ask for help. Severe mental disorders and the crises episodes linked to the condition are often accompanied by symptoms that have an impact on academic studies such as: inability to stay focused, forgetfulness, fatigue, absenteeism, emotional and behavioural ups and downs. When students present these kinds of symptoms, it is recommended that they benefit from individual support. If this is not already the case, information on how to ask for individual support is available on our [page about individual support](#).

For students in the second category (2), cognitive dysfunctions (for example trouble concentrating, fatigue) are part of their severe clinical picture. In this case, the referring physician should establish the student's ability to study while taking into account the symptoms that are not yet controlled by treatment. Students can provide a medical certificate proving their inability to study, or their partial inability to study. The ability to study, for students' whose medical condition (as described above) is unstable, must therefore be periodically reexamined by medical professionals. Therefore, medical certificates are never issued for more than two weeks and need to be renewed when necessary.

Students in the third category (3) receive regular therapeutic treatment for their mental disorder. The disorder has a cognitive impact that is known to the student and to the referring physician. This impact may be due to the disorder itself, or to the side effects of pharmacotherapy prescribed to alleviate the symptoms such as fatigue, headache, and trouble concentrating. Having undergone a neuropsychological assessment, these students can be in a relatively stable condition and can elaborate coping strategies.

Mental disorder can cause one or several of the following issues:

- Trouble concentrating or distractibility
- Comprehension problems
- Trouble expressing oneself verbally (oral and written expression)
- Trouble remembering
- Thinking process abnormalities (disorganized thinking, persistent ideas, etc.)
- Perceptual disturbances
- Affective instability
- Difficulties staying motivated
- Trouble initiating and completing difficult cognitive tasks
- Psychomotor slowing (PS), slow information processing
- Trouble planning tasks, anticipating needs, organizing, trouble adapting mentally
- Trouble reasoning logically (making the right decisions according to specific objectives)

All of the above-mentioned symptoms can vary according to the intensity of fatigue and the potential adaptation of medication to treat mental disorders. Medical care that is adapted to every individual can help identify each person's specific difficulty and elaborate organizational strategies and compensatory solutions.

2. Aspects linked to studies

Given the vast array of mental disorders, this document address only the areas in which the students face the most difficulties.

Students may, or may not (depending on their specific problems) and regardless of their intellectual capacities, face the issues described below.

Students' issue	Cause/origin of the issue	What is beneficial to students?
Being forgetful, lose track of what is being said/read	Linked to the impact on memory and the inability to stay focused	Record courses, use written documents, establish lists
Having trouble planning and organising	Linked to the impact of mental disorders on executive functions	Use a laptop with planning software (mind map, etc.) Specialised external coaching offering solutions to learn how to prioritise and plan major steps in the task-completion process
Having trouble to manage time and space efficiently	Linked to the impact of mental disorders on executive functions	Create time-reference frames, use planning tools, use a timer, get support from a specialised external coach
Difficulties in adapting to new situations or inhibition	Linked to the impact of mental disorders on executive functions	Get additional instructions from teaching staff, teaching staff explain their expectations for the course, get support from a specialised external coach (check with SAE)
Trouble adapting to tasks for example during practical exercises (to new information/situations, to unexpected events or to change)	Linked to the impact of mental disorders on executive functions	Teaching staff should repeat information and inform students ahead of time of any changes so that they may have enough time to adapt
Having trouble concentrating and/or focusing and having trouble processing information	Linked to the impact of mental illness on attention	Reducing visual and acoustic distractions, be granted more time to finish a task when necessary
Getting blocked in certain situations and having difficulties expressing ideas (for example for oral exams)	Linked to the cognitive impact of mental disorders	Teaching staff informs students in advance about upcoming stressful events, such as practical exercises, projects, exams and how they will be conducted
Being easily fatigued	Linked to the cognitive impact of mental disorders	Take breaks, splitting tasks into subtasks
Feeling a high level of anxiety without showing it	Due to all the issues linked to this disability and to the academic and social requirements	Contact Student Affairs (SAE)

It is important to factor in that learning disabilities (dyslexia, dyspraxia, etc) are often coupled to other mental disorders (comorbidity) such as for example an anxiety disorder. Also, a person may be affected by more than one mental disorder. For example, students suffering from an attention

deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and also from a bipolar disorder, will potentially have greater difficulties paying attention if they are simultaneously going through a depressive episode due to their bipolar disorder, even though they might be receiving adequate medical care. Every situation is unique and taking into account all the combined effects of potential multiple disorders is crucial.

Students with mental disorders are able to complete an academic curriculum if they receive adequate medical treatment. It is essential to avoid stigmatizing mental disorders and to aim at keeping students with mental disorders fit for their studies. This has an impact on their clinical prognosis and functional progression.

Students with psychological disorders need more time to adapt to new situations while also facing the usual changes of young adult life and university studies such as: new group dynamics, friendships, relationships and complex social interactions on campus (community life, hierarchical relations, etc.). All of these challenges can have an important impact on students' quality of life and their mental health.

For additional information or if one of your students is facing these challenges, please contact sae.amenagements@epfl.ch

For more information (in French): <https://cmha.ca/find-info/mental-health/>