Chapter 1
Are You Okay?
Examining the Role of Student Mental Health in the Online Classroom

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ABSTRACT

As faculty, our ultimate goal is student success. Higher education is often fast-paced, and students are juggling multiple roles and responsibilities. Many students learning online have children, careers, and are older than traditional college-age students. Adding college to an already full plate can create symptoms of burnout or due to the added stress may impact the well-being of students. By exploring how to identify various mental health issues and illnesses that students may present, the chapter will give knowledge, language, and understanding. This chapter presents common mental health issues that students may experience. Information will also be presented on how faculty can help students grow to reach their full potential as students while providing a supportive online classroom environment.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues continue to plague our nation with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) (2021) reporting one in five adults (ages 18 or older) experience mental illness each year. In 2021, 57.8 million people or 22.8 percent of adults in the United States experienced mental illness (SAMSHA, 2021). The 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that many adults (36.1 million people) perceived a negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their overall mental health (SAMSHA, 2021). These numbers show that mental health is a serious concern.

The number of students in higher education stating they have a mental health disorder has increased, and the severity of the disorder has increased too (Parizeau, 2022). Students do not struggle with only one disorder, but often are diagnosed with co-occurring mental health issues. Many enter higher education without a diagnosis and are later diagnosed during their degree program (Arachchige & Wijesekara, 2022). Mental health can improve and degrade without predictability, which complicates education for the student and requires understanding from the instructor.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of common mental health issues that an online educator might encounter in the classroom. It not meant to be used as a tool for diagosis rather it is meant to be informational. The chapter will address the symptoms and possible classroom behaviors of the following disorders that are likely to be seen in an online classroom setting: depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. While not exhaustive, this list will provide a context for common mental health issues. It is especially important for online instructors who are not in physical contact with their students to be aware of these signs and symptoms because students might not know to ask for accommodations or have a fear of stigma and avoid seeking the help needed to successfully complete courses. This chapter will then discuss why relationships are important in helping students who have been diagnosed with a mental health issue and ways higher educators can design their online classroom to enable the success of all students.

BACKGROUND OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE CLASSROOM/ COMMON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Online education can be a preferred mode of learning for people with mental health disabilities. An online classroom often allows students to coordinate schoolwork around their disability, work, and family commitments (McManus et al., 2017). The flexibility of the online classroom was cited as an advantage by students who noted the positive impact on their overall learning experience (Turan et al., 2022). Yet, Sniatecki et al. (2015) found that faculty often have more negative attitudes towards students with mental health issues above other disabilities. This can create attitudinal barriers to education for those who are diagnosed with a mental health disorder.

People with mental illness can struggle in online education. Part of the criteria of a mental health diagnosis is that it must significantly impair day to day function (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), which includes school. Mental health issues can limit students' self-perceived ability to finish assignments, and the stress from assignments can often trigger mental health symptoms. When this happens students will often put off assignments until their mental health feels more under control, which can create a scenario where their work will be late, as well as increase anxiety and stress due to the looming deadline (McManus et al., 2017). Students who have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder are less likely to successfully complete their education than their peers who have no diagnoses (McEwan & Downie, 2013).

Students who are struggling with mental health issues often have a very loud self-critic. At times this critic can create stress and be harmful to the student; other times it pushes them to survive, get things done, and succeed (Marszalek et al., 2021). Although this push could be a driving factor for success in life and a coping mechanism that allows for some success in school, it can also create internal stress and prevent the ability to receive feedback. It creates a lot of negative self-talk, which can inhibit completing assignments and finishing school. When a faculty member does not try to exemplify empathy, students

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