

# How Mental Health Affects Learning



Studies show that a rising number of college students are coping with depression, anxiety, PTSD, Bipolar, and other mental health challenges. Although individuals with mental health issues vary greatly, students in this disability category generally find common challenges related to college learning; struggles with focus, retention and retrieval all can impact student success.

**An internet search using the words 'college students, anxiety and depression' produces over 6 million hits!**

*For some, being academically unprepared for college adds to anxiety because many students in high school who received good grades were not taught HOW TO study. Add to this, students today are overwhelmed by work/family duties, social media and sports, along with class requirements for study, assignments and testing.*

Successful people use schedules and lists to complete tasks on time. They are **crucial** for students with mental health challenges.

- Daily & weekly schedules provide structure for keeping on track.
- Your schedule should be **very specific**. **Carry it with you everywhere!** It should include:
  - class times and locations,
  - preview/review/homework times,
  - weekly study time, commute times,
  - club/social times,
  - meal times and relaxing/enjoyment times.,
  - reminders (if needed) to take medication, drink water, exercise
  - SLEEP times.



**Ask your counselor for a worksheet to help you get started managing your time.**

Every student has strengths and weaknesses! Unfortunately, stress exacerbates weaknesses and can make them into seemingly insurmountable obstacles! When a student is challenged by a mental health condition, the student's normal stress level is heightened and this can cause functional limitations when it comes to learning.

**Some specific functional limitations that may or may not occur as part of your particular disability**

## Inability to screen out external stimuli such as sounds, sights, smells

- ✓ *Try This:* Move away from the air conditioner. Sit near the front of the class. Practice the "Tunnel Vision" exercise on the next page.

**Inability to concentrate:** In class students may feel fidgety, experience short attention span and difficulty remembering verbal directions. When home, students may have trouble focusing on one assignment for the time required to complete it.

- ✓ *Try This:* Plan out large assignments/projects so that they can be "chunked" into smaller parts. Reward yourself when each part is completed by taking a break – stretch, walk around, have a snack/drink. This will help your brain to stay motivated, knowing that a reward is coming upon completion of the task

**Retaining and retrieving:** Processing information from textbook during lecture during class or exam time can be difficult

- ✓ *Try This:* **Over-learn** the material. Use a memory strategy with feedback, test yourself using self-made quizzes, end of chapter quizzes. Correcting your previous tests and assignment errors makes learning active and helps with retention. Preview lecture material the night before to prepare your brain for the next day, and review lecture notes ASAP!
- ✓ Precise note taking – crucial to academic achievement - can be difficult when lack of sleep or medication interferes with concentration. Finding a notetaking system that helps to format and organize notes can be helpful. Also **make use of accommodations such as note-takers and recording devices** that will allow you to focus more on the lecture in class.



- ✓ Cornell Notetaking System is a structured notetaking system that helps students create organized notes
- ✓ **Use different colored highlighters** when reading and be selective about the material to highlight.
  - ❖ Taking notes while reading will help with the selection process – most students will *not* choose to rewrite the entire chapter.



Learn to prioritize and **DONT** procrastinate! **Procrastination is a student's worst enemy.**

**The general rule is; for every one hour spent in class the student should spend 2 hours studying.**

Plan for Breaks! At work you get breaks. College learning is work! Take short breaks while studying but **REMEMBER** to set an alarm to remind you to get back to studying after the 10-20 minute break is over.

**Practice these concentration/study techniques to see which one(s) work best for you:**

**EAT FROGS!** "Eating a frog" is an idiom which means to start each study session with the least appetizing, most difficult, most dreaded subject or assignment you have to complete. After that you are free to move on to the subject that's more interesting or easiest to you. Eat the frog so that you can move on yummy stuff!

### **TUNNEL VISION**

- While at home or someplace outside of school, practice tunnel vision by focusing in on one thing but have people move around you, tell someone to call/text you, turn the TV on and practice without having to look at them - just let them "be out there" as you focus on what is being taught
- When having a conversation with someone, practice keeping your attention on that person (you might want to tell them ahead of time so they don't feel weird)... look at her face, and note what is being said. Let the rest of the world just be "out there."

Recall this practice when in the classroom or when studying. Remember how successful you were, how accomplished you felt and say to yourself – "Let them be out there."

### **BE HERE NOW!**

This is related to forming a tunnel. Some students still struggle with putting distractions "out there" but due to a stronger internal locus of control, find success with this simple but effective strategy.

- This strategy trains your brain as you practice managing your distractions.
- When you notice your mind wandering, simply say to yourself "*Be here now*" and gently bring your attention back to where it needs to be.
- Again, practice this when you are not studying first

### **GET CENTERED**

Center yourself with silence...clear your mind of distractions that can disrupt productivity. There are a few things you can control when you sit down to study;

- Get a dedicated place to study in and silence your phone (not even vibrate should be on), and turn it face down.
- Put up a sign if you live with people who tend to interrupt you.
- Stick to a routine that accommodates your energy levels.
- Focus by creating a tunnel between yourself and your desk/book/notes.
- Plan an incentive for completing the tasks you have planned. Call a friend, take a walk, plan a treat.
- Change the subject you are studying every 1-2 hours. Alternate reading with problem solving, writing assignments...if you have a LOT of reading, take notes and ask yourself questions as you read – make your study time ACTIVE to help with memory.
- Take regular scheduled breaks – SCHEDULED breaks should not involve turning on the tv or social media or phone.
- Finally, give yourself a reward when you've completed your study session.

*Your DSPS team is here to help you overcome the hurdles and challenges of learning with ASD/Asperger's Syndrome. We can also help you to **turn your differences into strengths.***

