

### OVERVIEW and DEFINITION

Medical disabilities may be acute or chronic, visible or invisible, and the type of support needed is as diverse as the individuals seeking assistance.

### CHRONIC ILLNESSES

Types of medical conditions having educational implications include chronic health problems such as fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, arthritis, kidney disease, allergies, cardiovascular problems, cancer, diabetes, and HIV infections, as well as respiratory and gastro-intestinal disorders. Many of the college students who suffer from these conditions have frequent absences due to the effect of medication, fatigue and pain. Medical conditions can have an impact on an individual's ability to meet both the cognitive and physical demands of a college program.

Two examples of these chronic illnesses are described below.

**Fibromyalgia (FM)** is a chronic pain disorder with a broad spectrum of psychological and physical symptoms. It is a condition of widespread musculoskeletal pain usually affecting the arms, legs, back, chest, hands, feet and often the jaw. It is typically associated with chronic fatigue, sleep disturbance and generalized stiffness. Many FM patients also experience depression and anxiety as well as concentration and memory problems.

**Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)** is a debilitating disorder characterized by profound tiredness or fatigue. This condition is primarily characterized by extreme fatigue, muscle pain, depression, problems with concentration and memory and extreme flu-like symptoms. Individuals with CFS may become exhausted with only light physical exertion. Anxiety, irritability and problems with concentration and memory are common with this condition.

### Other Medical Conditions

**Tourette syndrome** is a neurologically based disorder with a strong genetic component. Other conditions that can co-exist with this condition include obsessive-compulsive disorder and mood disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and learning disabilities. Uncontrollable motor and vocal tics characterize Tourette syndrome, these may include eye blinking, head jerking, shoulder shrugging and facial grimacing, or simple vocal tics such as throat clearing and tongue clicking. Echolalic speech can occur (repeating words or phrases just heard) and in rare cases, coprolalia can occur (vocalizing socially unacceptable words).

**Asthma** is an obstruction of the airways, characterized by narrowing of the bronchial tubes, tissue swelling and clogging mucus. Males are twice as likely as females to have it.

**Epilepsy** is a disorder of the central nervous system which results in a seizure. For many adults, epileptic seizures are largely controlled by anti-convulsant medication. There are four major kinds of seizures, distinguished by the degree of convulsion and the extent to which the person is conscious. Grand mal epilepsy involves sudden and violent convulsions and loss of consciousness, whereas Petit mal epilepsy is milder and involves little or no loss of consciousness. The person may stop what he/she is doing and stare momentarily.

### EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS and INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Some specific, medically oriented knowledge can be very helpful in understanding a student's needs and learning patterns. It is important, however, that faculty approach medical information about a student from an educational, and not from a diagnostic point of view.

A common problem to students with medical disabilities is fatigue and pain. They have to expend more energy for the routines of daily living and so consideration should be given to their expenditure of energy in the classroom and surrounding environment. Pain and the adverse side effects of medication can be significant detractors to learning. Some generalized instructional strategies include:

# SSD FACULTY INFO

- locate equipment and supplies in close proximity to the student
- pre-arrange a cue to re-focus attention
- if the classroom is in a remote location request a change
- be aware of procedures if there is a medical emergency

## SUGGESTED ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

- access to note-taker and/or scribe
- use of memory aids such as formula cards during tests
- allowance of break periods as needed for rest and taking medication
- ergonomically designed seating/furnishings
- adjusted course grades for medical reasons (i.e. no penalty for late withdrawals)
- alternative methods of evaluation
- provision of extended time for tests and exams (usually time and a half).
- allowances for absences for medical reasons (i.e. rescheduling of tests or exams)