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Invisible Disabilities
What we will be covering

Today’s presentation and discussion will focus on certain disabilities that students, faculty, and staff may suffer from. These disabilities are not apparent by the person’s appearance, and in some cases, may require certain accommodations regarding class assignments, work, or even social interactions. We will be covering some of the most commonly identified invisible disabilities.
Our goal today

My main objective is to grant at least a general understanding of these conditions so that when you encounter an individual who has been diagnosed with an invisible disability, you will be able to understand their particular situation and make any accommodations if deemed necessary.
Webster’s Dictionary defines a disability as:
“A condition that damages or limits a person's physical or mental abilities.”

An invisible disability is just what it sounds like it would imply: A condition that cannot be seen, (or that is at least not immediately apparent) and limits a person’s abilities. It is used as an umbrella term that covers a broad spectrum of disorders that may include physical illnesses, mental disorders, birth defects, and injuries.

The term covers so many different disabilities that one cannot really discuss it in broad strokes. While certain disabilities may have similarities with others, each is unique. Also, the degree or severity of a condition in which a person is diagnosed may vary. It is very rare that you will see any two cases of the same disability to be identical.
10% of Americans are diagnosed with some kind of invisible disability.
Learning Disabilities

“Learning Disability” is yet another umbrella term used to describe certain disorders that may inhibit an individual’s ability to listen, read, write, or comprehend information.
Examples of a Learning Disorder

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD):**

Symptoms of AD/HD include inattention to events happening around the individual, difficulty listening, being distracted easily, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity.

**Dyslexia:**

Dyslexia is a condition in which the brain cannot appropriately process literal information while reading. It can either be a hereditary disorder or caused by brain injury.

**Dyscalculia:**

Much like dyslexia, dyscalculia is a condition in which the brain cannot properly process information read. However, instead of letters and words being misprocessed, this condition causes one to misinterpret numerical and mathematical information.
Chronic Illness

Diabetes:
Diabetes is a disease in which the body produces high amounts of blood sugar, or blood glucose. Individuals diagnosed with diabetes will need to constantly monitor their blood glucose levels to manage the ailment.

Cancer:
The National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov) defines cancer as a disease in which, “…abnormal cells divide without control and are able to invade other tissues.” Cancer can affect just about any part of the human body, even a person’s immune or nervous systems. Treatments for cancer can involve, but are not limited to, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and surgery.
Neurological and Psychological Disorders

A condition falling under this category can affect a person’s mental state or the functionality of the brain. Causes for these conditions are wide-ranging and can include chemical imbalances within the brain or injury to it.
Bipolar Disorder:

Also referred to as "Manic Depression", this neurological condition causes dramatic mood swings within an individual. A person can go from a "manic" or high state before plunging into a depressive state.

Alzheimer's Disease:

Alzheimer's is neurological disease that destroys a person's memory over time. As the disease progresses, it can cause difficulties in carrying out simple daily tasks. Most who are diagnosed with this condition are at, or above, the age of 60. Currently there is no cure for Alzheimer's.

Tourette’s Syndrome:

This condition compels an individual to make repeated motions, sounds, and/or actions known as “tics”. Tourette’s is usually associated with uncontrolled outbursts of swearing, though only a small percentage of those diagnosed have this particular tic. Tics can also include a wide array of actions such as snapping of fingers, blinking, whistling, and repeating speech.
Depression

One of the most common psychological disorders, depression can be described as a constant “low” feeling. Symptoms of depression can include fatigue, insomnia, hypersomnia (excessive sleeping), loss of interest in activities, significant weight loss or gain, feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt, and suicidal thoughts.

Depression is a real medical condition and not something that a person can just “get over”. Treatments can range from talk therapy, psychotherapy, and medications such as antidepressants.
Autism Spectrum Disorders

"Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges."

-Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

An ASD will affect an individual's behaviors, interests, communication skills, and social interactions. Symptoms of an ASD usually develop within the first 3 years of a person's life.
The diagnoses for ASD fall under 1 of 3 categories

- Autistic Disorder (aka Classic Autism)
- Asperger's Syndrome
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)
**Autistic Disorder:**

Depending on the severity of their diagnoses, an adult with Autistic Disorder (also plainly referred to as just "Autism") may be able to live a fully independent life. At least 33% of individuals with Classic Autism are able to live with some level of independence.

**Symptoms of Autistic Disorder include, but are not limited to:**

- Difficulties in communication
- Oversensitivity to sights, sounds, and other sensations.
- Tic like behaviors
- Being withdrawn
- Strong preference for routines or sameness
- Slow or non-development of speaking skills
- Preference to solitary recreational activities
- Lack of empathy
- Many similar symptoms to AD/HD
- An unusually intense interest in one subject
- Some kind of sleep disorder
Asperger Syndrome

A "high functioning" ASD, adults with Asperger's are usually able to live a considerably normal life, but will have great difficulties when it comes to social interactions. Asperger's shares a number of symptoms with Autistic Disorder but generally at a lower level of severity.

Symptoms of Asperger Syndrome may include but are not limited to:

- Clumsiness
- Monotone speech
- Difficulties relating to others
- Limited but intense interests
- Trouble picking up on social cues
- Difficulties maintaining appropriate eye contact
- Unable or difficult to respond emotionally to social interactions
- Unusual facial expressions and posture
Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified

This diagnosis is used for those who show signs of an Autism Spectrum Disorder but do not meet the criteria for Autistic Disorder or Asperger's Syndrome. Symptoms may vary in severity, though it is considered a mild form of Autism.
General Tips Regarding Interactions

- Do NOT ask directly about the person's disability.
- Be respectable and patient.
- Repeat or rephrase questions and/or statements for clarification.
- If you believe an individual requires additional services due to their disability and they are not already seeking assistance, direct them to the appropriate campus resources.
Resources

- Disabled World - disabled-world.com
- MNT - medicalnewstoday.com
- National Cancer Institute - cancer.gov
- American Cancer Society - cancer.org
- Autism Speaks - autismspeaks.org
- National Institute of Neurological Disorders & Stroke - ninds.nih.gov
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