

# Chronic Medical Conditions and Unseen Disabilities

## Information about Chronic Medical Conditions and Unseen Disabilities

Many disabilities are 'invisible' or 'unseen' and you would not necessarily guess from first glance that the individual is disabled, and the impact on day-to-day living, although significant, might not be obvious to others.

This might include conditions such as arthritis, cystic fibrosis, Crohn's disease, coeliac disease, ulcerative colitis, diabetes, pain conditions, myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME)/chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), cancer, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis (MS), HIV, or epilepsy. All these conditions tend to be fluctuating in nature, making the impact unpredictable and changeable from one day to another - people often talk about having "good days and bad days".

*Note: Unseen disabilities also include mental health conditions, specific learning difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders. These are discussed individually elsewhere.*

## Implications for study

Students who have been living with a chronic medical condition for a long time before coming to university are likely to have good coping strategies in place, and won't necessarily experience any study difficulties. However, some will struggle initially whilst they adjust to meet the new academic requirements and study schedule. Day-to-day domestic tasks and activities associated with independent living might feel like a particular burden on top of the careful management of a health condition, treatment regime, and medical appointments, especially if they have been used to getting a lot of support whilst living at home. Any changes to drug treatments can be very disruptive to study.

Students can find that their condition has an impact on their attendance and on the quality and volume of the academic work they are able to produce due to a reduction in their pace of working, the need for regular breaks, fatigue and concentration issues, and thus difficulty meeting deadlines.

## Guidance for working with students with chronic medical conditions and unseen disabilities

The following notes highlight factors to take into consideration when working with these students and suggest practical action and informal adjustments which might be made.

## Communication

- Talk to the student about their disability. Ask them discretely about the impact of their disability and discuss with them what might be helpful; never ask or expect a student to discuss personal or medical details with you.
- Consider keeping in touch more regularly than you otherwise might to monitor academic progress, especially with those whose conditions fluctuate significantly; acknowledge that variable attendance might in some cases be due to their condition rather than lack of effort.

## Environment

- Assess your teaching room for adequate lighting and heating, and limit background noise where possible (open windows, noisy extractor fans and heating/cooling units) to limit the impact on existing concentration problems.
- Reserve seating (if helpful) near to exits so the student is able to leave discretely if needed.
- Provide locations and allow activities which allow the student to manage their environment – for example, being allowed to sit or stand, choose their location in a room, leave as necessary without fuss, take in medication, or eat/drink when necessary, have easy access to bathroom facilities or access to ergonomic furniture.

## Study

- Consider offering additional individual support and assistance with establishing priorities for workload at short notice, for a short/defined period of time, if the student is experiencing a 'flare up' in their symptoms.
- Recognise the impact of variable fatigue and concentration levels on attendance and provide, for example, opportunities to revisit topics, use of assistive technology (such as lecture recording facilities).
- Occasional flexibility with deadlines might be required to allow the student to manage their workload; rest breaks or extra time might be needed for activities such as practicals or field work.
- On occasion the student might feel too unwell to attend and might need someone else to record a lecture for them.

## Planning / Organisation

- Give key course information, deadlines and timetables in advance.
- Keep timetables as consistent as possible to help provide structure, and give advance notice of any changes (times, venues) so that the student can plan their workload to compensate for difficulties with concentration, organisation, reduced speed of working, and fatigue; Consider the ease and potentially extended travel time required when setting timetables/locations and adjust accordingly where possible.
- Consider the scheduling of meetings, tutorials, lectures and exams to enable students to manage concentration difficulties and tiredness (medication or sleep disruption may increase fatigue in the mornings).

- Be aware of increased potential for absence for medical appointments.
- Additional consideration when planning field work and years abroad to anticipate potential stressors/barriers to participation and identify support in a timely way.
- Carefully manage any return to study after a period of absence on medical grounds; a condition is unlikely to have disappeared. A phased return might be required with opportunity to review plans regularly. In some cases opportunities to reduce the rate of study might be needed.

## Examples of reasonable adjustments

The Student Support Plan (SSP) sets out the formal reasonable adjustments recommended by the Disability Advisory Service, and will provide additional specific individual information where needed. However, the following list gives some examples of possible reasonable adjustments.

**Please note these adjustments will not be applicable to every student nor is this list exhaustive.**

- Examination adjustments such as extra time, a separate room, rest breaks, use of a computer, and consideration of appropriate examination scheduling.
- Provision of a note-taker in lectures; permission to record lectures or take notes on a computer; access to lecture capture.
- Privileged reader status at college / University libraries including extended and/or proxy loans.
- Evaluate need for a risk assessment for practical/laboratory settings, and a Personal Emergency Evacuation (PEEP) for College/Department buildings.
- Provision of onsite accommodation with ensuite bathroom facilities (if necessary) and the option to be able to keep the same room throughout the course (and vacations); allocation of a room in a quiet location, away from communal facilities or thoroughfares so that problems with sleep and concentration are not compounded.
- Provision of specialist ergonomic furniture.

## Additional resources:

- For further advice and information staff may contact the Disability Advisory Service by email on [disability@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:disability@admin.ox.ac.uk) or telephone **01865 (2)80459**, or see our [student](#) and [staff](#) web pages.
- [HealthTalk](#) – a collection of patient experience videos which provide reliable health information and support for a range of health issues.