

The Higher Education Support Toolkit

Over the past 15 years, the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University has offered skill-teaching and practical supports to assist students with psychiatric disabilities in achieving their education goals. Beginning with an on-campus program at Boston University that focused on career planning and, later, development of an education program model known as “Supported Education,” the Center has been a leader in emphasizing the value and importance of education for students experiencing psychiatric disabilities. Center staff have also developed resources and tools to help students identify and acquire needed skills, supports, and accommodations to successfully complete a course or program of academic study.

The National Institute of Disability Rehabilitation Research and the Center for Mental Health Services provided grant support for the Center to build on its previous work and develop the Higher Education Support Toolkit: Assisting Students with Psychiatric Disabilities. Its focus is twofold:

1. Assist students in clarifying the issues that are hindering their academic success and satisfaction, and
2. Assist students in discovering the skills, supports, and strategies that will enable them to overcome the barriers to achieving their educational goals.

The Toolkit is intended for use by a broad audience within the network of campus services such as disability services, behavioral health, and student affairs. The Toolkit includes:

Part 1: Student Self-Assessment

Two checklists are provided to assist the student in clarifying the health, personal, interpersonal, and/or academic issues that may be hindering their success and satisfaction.

Part 2: Getting Connected to Campus Resources

Forms are available to encourage campus service providers to compile a comprehensive and easily accessible resource list from which students can customize resources to meet their individual needs.

Part 3: Actions and Accommodations in the College Classroom

A Guide to Psychiatric Disorders is provided to help providers better understand the common difficulties and/or limitations that students experiencing a psychiatric disability may encounter in class. Possible strategies that can be implemented and/or adjustments that a student may be entitled to are highlighted in the Guide.

Information and Resources

Organizations, websites, fact sheets, and articles relevant to students with psychiatric disabilities and those who are supporting them in achieving their educational goals are listed.

The toolkit is available as a free download at the Center's website:
www.bu.edu/cpr/resources/supportstudents/

The Systematic Review of Supported Education

As part of a grant provided by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), the Center is developing an innovative way of translating research findings into usable information that consumers, families, providers, and other researchers can easily access. As a first step, it is conducting a series of systematic reviews of research literature. The topic of the first review was supported housing; the second addresses the critical area of supported education.

The objective of the report was to systematically review all literature related to supported education for individuals with severe mental illness. The premise for this systematic review was the belief that there has been important and significant research published in the field of supported education that urgently needed to be synthesized for the mental health field at large. Recognizing that the findings of this research could be useful to stakeholders, end users, and other constituents in the mental health field, the Center will make the review available online.

The following plain-language summary of the report distills the essence of what Center staff learned about the state of supported education research.

Plain-Language Summary Systematic Review of Supported Education

Supported education for individuals with severe mental illness seeks to provide the services necessary to place and keep individuals in integrated post-secondary educational settings so that consumers can achieve their educational goals. It can be contrasted both philosophically and logistically with the traditional model in which individuals with psychiatric disabilities were expected to receive training or educational instruction in segregated settings with specialized curricula. In supported education, individuals with psychiatric disabilities are assisted to develop post-secondary educational goals, then resources and services are provided to support the individual in reaching their goals.

Results of this systematic review of supported education suggest that there are a very few well-controlled studies of supported education and numerous studies with minimal evaluation data and less rigorous designs.

As a result, our systematic review concludes that there are limited effectiveness data for supported education programs. There is information to suggest that individuals with psychiatric disabilities, when compared to the general population, have a lower rate of post-secondary degree completion. There is also information to suggest that individuals with psychiatric disabilities who are enrolled in supported education programs are younger, more educated, and less functionally impaired when compared to individuals with psychiatric disabilities in general. Evidence from existing studies suggests that individuals with significant psychiatric disabilities can enroll in and pursue educational opportunities in integrated settings in the community. There is preliminary evidence that supported education can help individuals identify educational goals, find and link to resources needed to complete their education, and assist them in coping with barriers to completing their education. There is very preliminary but insufficient information that supported education can increase the educational attainment of individuals with psychiatric disabilities. Because many studies are short-term and focus on course completion, there is no rigorous evidence to suggest that supported education will lead to a greater number of individuals with psychiatric disabilities possessing advanced degrees or certificates. Further, there is no rigorous evidence that supported education leads to higher employment rates among participants.

If supported education is to become a viable service alternative and widespread intervention and if mental health policies are to emphasize educational attainment, more effectiveness research on supported education models is critically needed.

The College Mental Health Initiative at Boston University

The collegiate experience is typically the time period in which students are challenged as they assume new roles and responsibilities. These stressors can impact not only their mental health, but ultimately their success at a university.

Students with significant mental health challenges often need and want support in the form of people to help them cope with and navigate the pressures of academic and university life. The ability to provide these supports is key to developing a proactive culture of mental health on campus.

In response to the national call to develop comprehensive campus-wide mental health services, the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation—through the College Mental Health Initiative—has increased its efforts to provide a variety of services to the Boston University Community.

The initiative can be grouped into two categories: efforts directly serving students and efforts serving to educate faculty and staff.

Services We Provide to Students

- Engage students in collaborative relationship
 - Identify students at risk and monitor student success
 - Assess student functioning on campus across health, learning, living, social, emotional, and financial domains
 - Plan interventions on campus in collaboration with various Boston University offices such as Behavioral Health and Disability Services
 - Assist student reentry via advocacy and outreach to Financial Aid, BIT, and Residence Life
 - Provide wake-up calls
 - Offer emotional support and coaching through weekly meetings, e-mails, cell calls, and text messages
 - Develop and sustain ACTIVE MINDS, an on-campus student-run organization, as a resource for students. Center staff act as faculty advisors
 - Promote mental health awareness through educational opportunities at colleges on campus and marketing
 - Provide a welcoming, safe place on campus for students to come for support and in order to reduce isolation—a family away from family
 - Promote social networks
 - Provide rehabilitation counseling and coaching for student issues to promote educational skill and support development
 - Accompany students to faculty meetings to develop academic rescue plans and support academic growth and success
 - Ensure follow-through of student tasks to increase probability of academic success and focus on increasing student strengths across wellness domains
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Services We Provide to Faculty & Staff

- Suggest and assist in the design of reasonable accommodations
- Provide emotional support and coaching
- Assess skill strengths and deficits in the context of essential job functions of a vocational job
- Assist in prioritizing job tasks
- Provide advocacy with administration
- Offer interpersonal skill teaching
- Increase knowledge of mental health, rehabilitation, and recovery among key Boston University personnel
- Develop and participate in campus infrastructure of services for students in need
- Educate Boston University community about stigma in seeking help
- Provide leadership on campus regarding mental health and wellness
- Collaborate to offer comprehensive safety net for students
- Provide link to recovery-oriented community clinicians for students
- Make presentations to BU School of Medicine faculty