

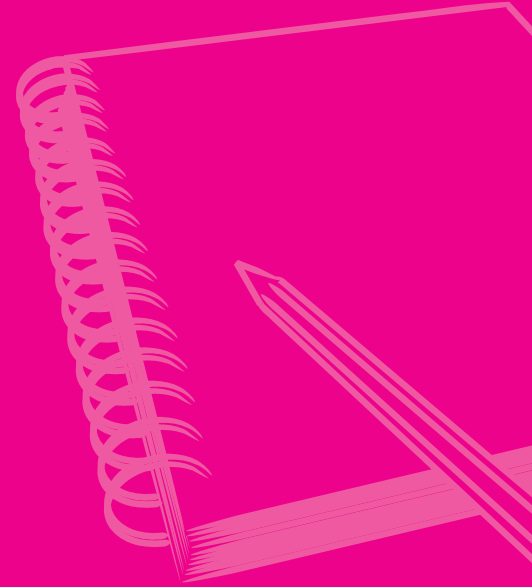
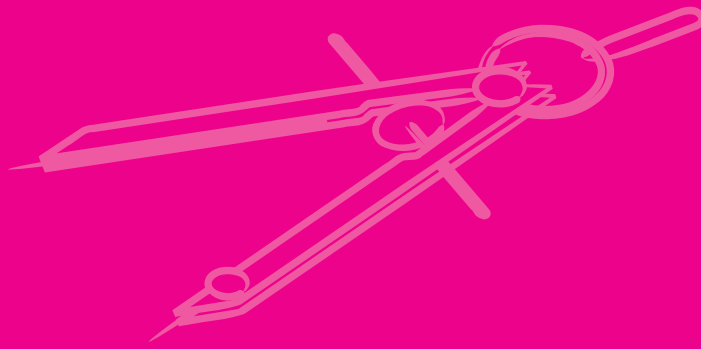


0141 568 7000  
ENQUIRE@SAMH.ORG.UK  
WWW.SAMH.ORG.UK

# MAKING REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS FOR STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

## **A SOLUTIONS GUIDE FROM SAMH**

Education providers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for students who are disabled. This guide provides straightforward advice on making reasonable adjustments for students with mental health problems. It was produced in consultation with staff and students. It looks at how you could go about making adjustments, why you would want to do so and where you can get help and support. If you would like information or advice on any of these issues, please contact SAMH.



# WHAT IS A REASONABLE ADJUSTMENT?

If a student is disabled and is placed at a substantial disadvantage by something that their college or university does, or something about their physical environment, then the college or university must take reasonable steps to prevent that disadvantage. In other words, they should make reasonable adjustments.

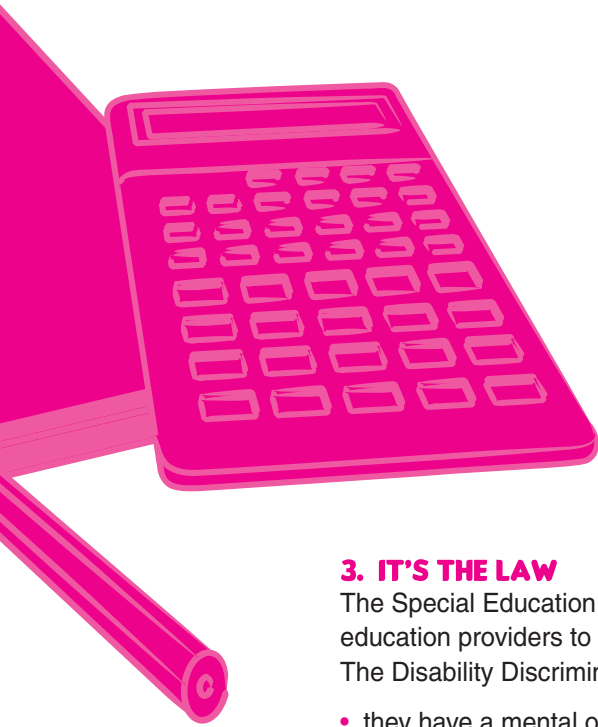
## WHY SHOULD I MAKE REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS?

### 1. IT CAN HELP PROGRESSION AND RETENTION

Research indicates that students may be more likely than other groups to experience mental health problems<sup>1</sup> and that serious mental health problems among students are increasing<sup>2</sup>. Statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency suggest that the proportions of undergraduates declaring a mental health difficulty on entry to higher education rose from 5 in every 10,000 in 1994-5 to almost 36 in every 10,000 in 2006-07. Creating a culture in which students can ask for and receive reasonable adjustments at an early stage is likely to make it easier for students to complete their course.

### 2. IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO

People with serious mental health problems have the lowest employment rate of any group of people with disabilities, with 79% not in employment<sup>3</sup>. Helping students to complete their education should help to reduce that figure in future. Work is a key part of life, and our self-esteem is inextricably linked to our ability to earn a living. It is wrong to deny people the opportunity to do so. Reasonable adjustments are not about unfair advantages or favouritism, but are a way of removing barriers preventing students who are disabled from getting the most out of their education – or sometimes from participating in education at all. One in four of us will experience a mental health problem at some point, so this is an issue that affects us all.



### **3. IT'S THE LAW**

The Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001 introduced a requirement for education providers to make reasonable adjustments for people who are disabled. The Disability Discrimination Act says that a person is disabled if:

- they have a mental or physical impairment
- this has substantial long-term adverse effects on their normal day-to-day activities.

### **HOW DO I MAKE REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS?**

Adjustments need to be agreed between the student and the relevant staff member(s). You should make sure that you are familiar with your institution's procedures for making reasonable adjustments: for example, at many institutions, primary responsibility for agreeing adjustments rests with the student services or student disability services department. But if you think someone might need support, don't leave it to someone else to check whether adjustments are needed. In particular, be aware that although you might think it is very clear that students who need reasonable adjustments should contact the student services or student disability services department – it might not be at all clear to students.

Some mental health problems can be episodic: a person can experience long periods when they are perfectly well, but may then experience a further period of difficulty. The times when they are unwell will not always be the same, but there may be symptoms or issues that are common to each episode. So rather than agreeing one or more specific adjustments that will apply all the time, it may be more helpful to agree adjustments that can be implemented when they are needed, and revoked when they are not. Bear in mind that students who are physically disabled may also experience mental health problems, so you may need to make adjustments that address more than one disability.

### **WHAT SORT OF REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS MIGHT I HAVE TO MAKE?**

Your student services or student disability services department might ask you to make reasonable adjustments for a student who has a mental health problem. At many educational institutions, there is an agreed "menu" of adjustments that can be made for students who have disabilities. However in smaller institutions, adjustments might be agreed on a case-by-case basis. In order for reasonable adjustments to be constructive, they must focus on what the student can do – not on what they can't. It is also important that you do not make promises that you are unable to keep: be realistic. Not all of them will be suitable for your college or university, and it is not an exhaustive list. If you are not sure what will help someone – ask them!

# TYPES OF ADJUSTMENTS



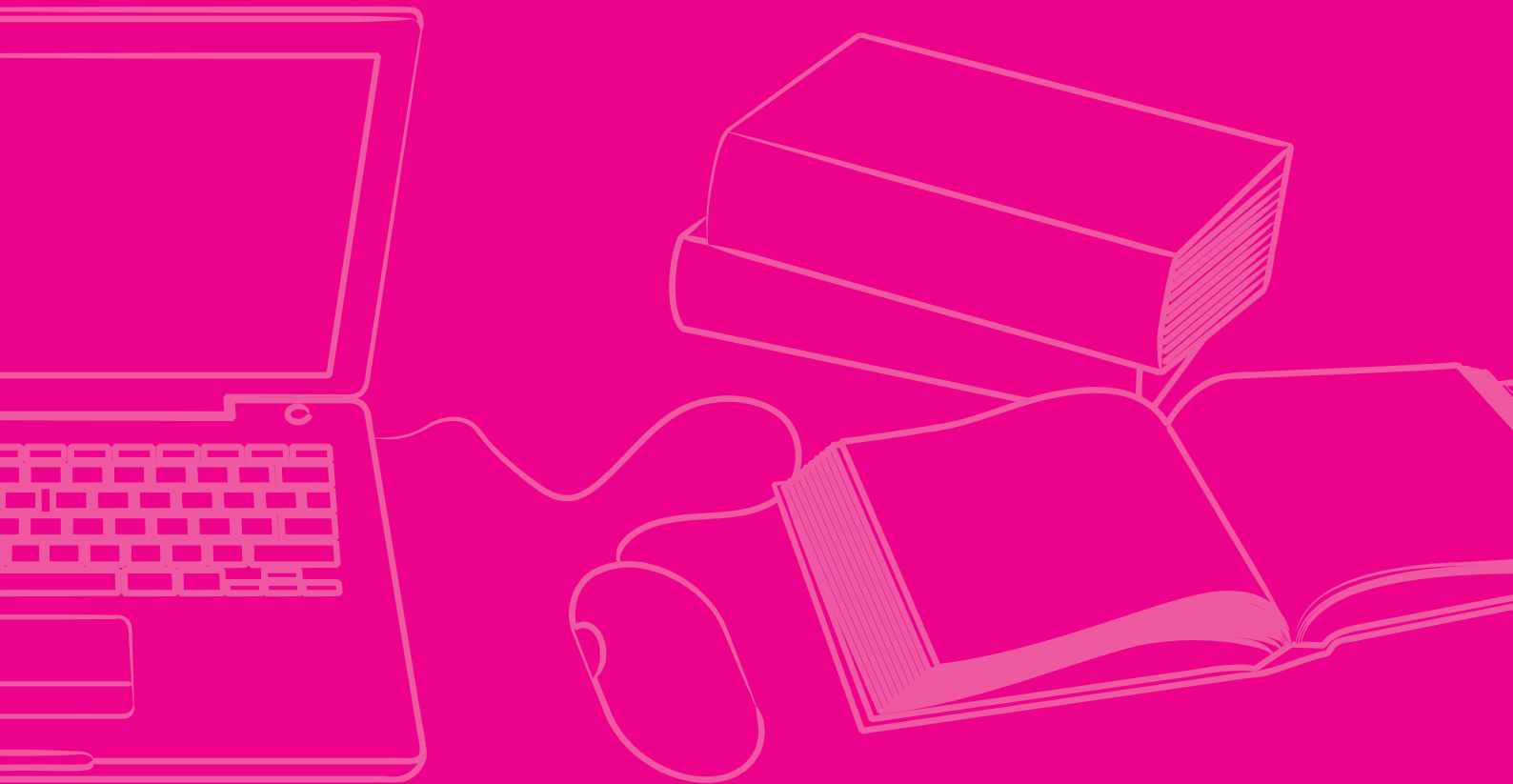
This section sets out some of the types of adjustment that you might be asked to make, and the possible reasons for them.

## CLASS HOURS OR STRUCTURES

- **Changing attendance times** Rescheduling classes is unlikely to be feasible, but you might be asked to allow a student to attend a different tutorial or lab than the one they are assigned to, or to make class notes available on the intranet or prepare handouts for students who can't attend classes. There are many reasons why someone might have difficulties with classes at certain times. They might need to access a service that is only available during working hours, or they might find it difficult to function in the morning, perhaps as a result of prescribed medication, but be able to work well later in the day.
- **Allow the student to take rest breaks** Some people might have difficulty in concentrating for long periods: breaking up their day could help.
- **Extend deadlines** If a student experiences difficulties in concentration or similar problems, it might be reasonable to allow them more time to complete tasks.

## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- **Allow the person to change their study area** For some people, noisy environments might adversely affect their mental health at times: if it is feasible, could they be located somewhere else?
- **Ensure access to natural light and fresh air** Many people benefit from sitting near to a window, particularly if they are able to open it to allow fresh air to circulate.
- **Move their study area** Would it be helpful to be based in another position – e.g. so their back didn't face the door?
- **Provide a quiet space for breaks** A quiet place away from the main study area is helpful for many people.



## WORKING PRACTICES

- **Agree changes to communication methods** For some people, there may be times when it is hard to communicate face-to-face. You may be asked to agree that at these times, students can communicate with you by email, or work from home.
- **Allow changes to assignments** You may be asked to allow a student to complete a task in a different way. For example, if a student has severe anxiety problems and is required to do a presentation, you may be asked to allow them to present to fewer people, or to prepare the presentation but not deliver it.
- **Allow changes after a period of absence** When a person is unwell or has just returned from a period of absence, it may be helpful for them to focus on a particular type of task. You may be asked to allow the student to work to a reduced or altered study programme for a while. This can help to rebuild confidence.
- **Allow the use of headphones if appropriate** This can help people who have difficulty concentrating or who sometimes hear voices.
- **Allow the student to use a recording device if appropriate** A Dictaphone or other recording device can benefit students who find it hard to take notes in class, perhaps because of concentration difficulties. The student can then write up their notes later on.
- **Allow changes to exam conditions** Your institution should have procedures for making adjustments to exams for students who are disabled. Exams are, of course, stressful for all students, but they can be particularly overwhelming for students who have experienced a mental health problem. Reasonable adjustments to exams can make all the difference, allowing students to successfully complete their course.



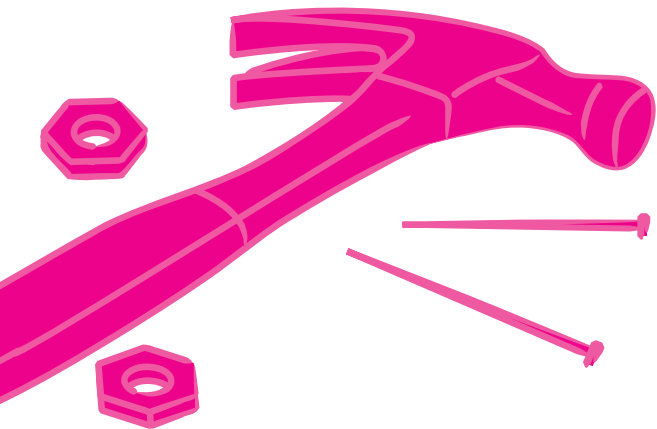
# HOW DO I TALK ABOUT IT?

People are often reluctant to talk about mental health problems. They worry that they will make things worse or accidentally say the wrong thing. The best thing to do is keep things simple. Asking, “What can I do to help?” is very unlikely to offend or upset anyone. And if you’re not sure what language to use – for example, “mental health problems”, or “mental illness” – then ask the person what they prefer.

Students should not feel they have to disclose every aspect of their mental health problem. Your discussions should focus on the problems they are experiencing, and what actions can be taken to address them. Of course if someone is extremely distressed or confused, then you should get appropriate help immediately. Your institution will have guidance on where to refer students in these situations: it might well be the university or college medical staff, or student welfare staff.

## **BUT I'M NOT A COUNSELLOR...**

You don't have to be. Your institution will have guidance on where to refer students when they need emotional support or counselling. All you have to do is work with students in your own sphere of responsibility, whether that is teaching, supervision, technical support or something else.



# WHAT ELSE SHOULD I KNOW?

Other things to think about are:

- Planning ahead to ensure that reasonable adjustments can be implemented without causing the student embarrassment in front of their peers.
- Putting yourself in the position of the student: for example, if you work in a shared office and someone comes to you for help, ask if you need to find a private place to talk.
- Being approachable: it can take a lot of courage for a student to ask someone for help.

## WHAT IF THINGS GO WRONG?

Sometimes it is difficult to know how to react when a student who has a mental health problem is underperforming. If this is due to the person's mental health problem, then the correct way to deal with this is by negotiating reasonable adjustments to the person's course or environment. However, neither the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 nor any other piece of legislation requires you to accept behaviour that is inappropriate. People with mental health problems are entitled to equal, not special, treatment.

Similarly, you do not have to make each and every reasonable adjustment that a student might request. There may be certain requirements that every student must, without exception, comply with. This is fine: as long as there is a genuine reason for this requirement. Indeed, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 specifically states that less favourable treatment of a student with a disability is justified if it is necessary in order to maintain academic or other prescribed standards. But often, it is possible to find creative solutions that allow the student to participate without weakening academic requirements.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Scoping Study on Transitional Support for Students with Mental Health Difficulties, University of Paisley, 2006
- 2 The Mental Health of Students in Higher Education, Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003
- 3 Disability and Employment in Scotland: review of evidence base (Scottish Executive 2005)

# WHERE CAN I GET HELP AND ADVICE?

## **EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

Provides advice and guidance on equality issues and incorporates responsibilities previously held by Disability Rights Commission.

[www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

## **GEOGRAPHY DISCIPLINE NETWORK**

Developing an Inclusive Curriculum for Students with Mental Health Issues.

[www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/icp/imental.pdf](http://www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/icp/imental.pdf)

## **SAMH**

We can provide training on making reasonable adjustments as well as mental health awareness and equality and diversity. See also our guide to Making Reasonable Adjustments in the Workplace for People with Mental Health Problems.

[www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)

## **SCOTTISH DISABILITY TEAM**

Aims to improve higher education provision for students with a disability.

[www.sdt.ac.uk](http://www.sdt.ac.uk)

## **SCOTTISH WIDER ACCESS REGIONAL FORUMS**

National group of the four regional forums which aim to widen access to education.

[www.swarf.ac.uk](http://www.swarf.ac.uk)

## **SEE ME**

Scotland's campaign against the stigma associated with mental health problems. Can provide material to display.

[www.seemescotland.org.uk](http://www.seemescotland.org.uk)

## **SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

Guidance and information, including case studies and student experiences.

[www.ssmh.ac.uk](http://www.ssmh.ac.uk)

*SAMH would like to thank Greggs the Bakers, who generously funded this publication. SAMH would also like to thank everyone who contributed to the development of this guide, including staff at Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh's Telford College and staff and students at Glasgow Caledonian University.*

**If you would like to receive a copy of this guide in large text format, please call: 0141 568 7000.**



**SAMH, Cumbrae House, 15 Carlton Court, Glasgow G5 9JP Telephone: 0141 568 7000**  
**Email: [enquire@samh.org.uk](mailto:enquire@samh.org.uk) [www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)**

SAMH is a company limited by guarantee, registered in Scotland No: 82340. Scottish Charity No: SC-008897.  
 Registered office: Cumbrae House, 15 Carlton Court, Glasgow G5 9JP