

Considerations for Mental Health Support While Transition Planning

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May 2024

Mental health disorders affect 1 out of every 4 people (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2024). Anxiety and depression are growing among children and youth, yet many mental health disorders go undiagnosed until after youth leave school.

Educators and service providers play an important role in supporting youth throughout their K-12 education and preparing them for postsecondary transition. These professionals provide stronger supports when they are aware of the impact of mental health concerns. Therefore, they should understand the prevalence of mental health disorders in transition-age youth and recognize when mental health may be a consideration in transition planning.

It is also critical for educators to learn strategies to support positive mental health practices before and during the transition process. Sharing these strategies with employers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and disability support services providers helps to set youth up for successful transition outcomes.

Mental Health Prevalence Among Transition-Aged Youth

Transition-aged youth, defined as individuals between 16 to 25 years old, experience a significant prevalence of mental health issues. It is estimated that between 6% and 12% of transition-age youth struggle with serious mental health conditions (Copeland et al., 2015). This period of life involves crucial changes, including new relationships, educational opportunities, and the development of greater independence. These transitions can exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions and introduce challenges in accessing suitable mental health services.

Entering adulthood is a big step in life. People often discover more about themselves and become more independent. This is when they make important choices about where to live, work, and study further. Understandably, this time can be tough for anyone, and it is even harder for young people with disabilities. Many of them face extra challenges during this period. That is why it's not surprising that they're more likely to have mental health issues.

According to the CDC (2023), depression and anxiety are becoming more common among kids and teenagers, and issues like depression, using drugs, and thoughts of suicide are worrying trends among teens. To make things more complicated, very few students with serious mental health problems get the help they need in school. Less than 10% of them get an Individualized Education Program (Forness et al., 2012), and many drop out of school before they finish planning for their future (Wagner & Newman, 2012).

Mental Health and Disability

Mental health and disability are two interrelated yet distinct areas of health that significantly impact individuals and society. Mental health refers to one's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, and behave in daily life. It also influences how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. Common mental health disorders include depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These conditions can be deeply disruptive, affecting one's ability to lead a fulfilling, productive life. Treatment for mental health issues can include therapy, medication, and lifestyle changes. The approach often depends on the individual and the specific disorder.

Disability is conditions impairing a person's body or mind, limiting one or more major life activities. This includes physical disabilities (such as blindness or paralysis) and mental or cognitive disabilities (such as intellectual disability or autism). Disabilities can be congenital (present at birth) or acquired due to injury, illness, or aging. The impact of a disability can vary widely: some individuals may require significant adaptations and support, while others may be more independent.

Intersection of Mental Health and Disability

The intersection between mental health and disability is significant. Individuals with disabilities may experience mental health challenges due to social stigma, discrimination, or the everyday stresses associated with their condition. Conversely, poor mental health can lead to decreased physical health or perceived cognitive abilities, complicating existing disabilities or contributing to new ones.

Efforts to support individuals at this intersection typically involve healthcare services, social support, and accommodations, both in the workplace and in broader society. There is a strong emphasis on ensuring accessibility, promoting inclusivity, and upholding the rights of individuals with disabilities and mental health issues. Advocacy and legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States, seek to protect these rights and facilitate full participation in society for all individuals, regardless of their mental or physical condition.

Mental Health and Transition

Moving from high school to a job or college can be difficult for students with disabilities who also deal with mental health issues. They face a lot of challenges during this time that can make their mental health problems worse. Studies show that this transition period is often very stressful and uncertain for them (Young-Southward et al., 2017). They might have trouble getting the help they need in school or at work, making things even harder for them (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012).

Also, people might mistreat them because of their disabilities or mental health issues, which can make them feel alone and not good enough (Sheerin et al., 2019). Without enough support and help, this transition can be too much for them, making it tough for them to do well in school or at work. That's why schools, employers, and people who make rules need to make sure they create places that welcome everyone. Giving extra help to students with disabilities and mental health issues during this critical time is everyone's responsibility.

Strategies for Support

Helping students with disabilities and mental health issues as they move from high school is a multi-step process. The most important thing is making sure they have a plan that addresses their unique needs. This plan should start early and involve teachers, families, and other people who can help. It should include everything from school to work to mental health (Test et al., 2009). Giving them support with their feelings and mental health as they go through this change is important. This helps them learn ways to deal with problems and become stronger (Madaus et al., 2009).

Smooth transitions require building connections between schools, disability services, and the community. This way, they can find the help and resources they need (Wehman et al., 2014). Making sure that both schools and workplaces are inclusive and making changes to help everyone can also make a big difference (Burgstahler, 2015). Teaching others about disabilities and mental health can also create a more welcoming environment for all students (Liu et al., 2020). By working together on all these things, educators and other stakeholders can give students with disabilities and mental health issues the support they need to succeed in school and beyond.

Helpful Hints

The following strategies are ways that educators, service providers, and other stakeholders can support postsecondary transition for students with disabilities and mental health needs.

- Build trust and talk openly with students to understand their needs.
- Work together with counselors and specialists to make personalized plans.
- Give emotional support and teach coping skills.
- Adjust learning tasks to fit each student's abilities.

- Make sure resources and help are easy to reach.
- Create a welcoming classroom where everyone feels included.
- Teach students to speak up for themselves and solve problems.
- Help students explore their options after school.
- Connect students with outside groups that can support them.
- Stay up-to-date on laws and ways to help students with disabilities and mental health needs.

Conclusion

Supporting students with disabilities and mental health conditions during the transition from high school requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Educators and stakeholders should prioritize early and individualized transition planning. The plan should include ways to provide ongoing mental health support, foster partnerships between stakeholders, implement inclusive practices, and raise awareness. By addressing their unique needs and challenges with empathy and innovation, we create inclusive and supportive environments that enable students to thrive academically, professionally, and personally. It is through collective effort and dedication that we can ensure all students, regardless of their abilities or mental health status, have the opportunity to reach their full potential and lead fulfilling lives.

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