

# Working Effectively With Students and Adults Exhibiting Signs of Mental Illness

By Jeff Jorgensen  
Director of Student Support Services

## Working Effectively With Your Mother-in-law

For Thanksgiving Day Preparations

**I'm Okay, You're Okay, But I  
Think He Is Mentally Ill**

Specifically for presentations to highly Narcissistic populations!

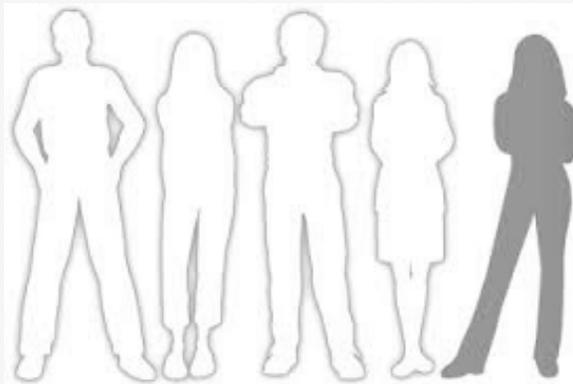
**Working Effectively with Histrionic,  
Narcissistic and Co-Dependent IEP  
Team Members**

For Special Education Teachers

## One in Five Children



## One In Five Adults



**OR**

Eight in Ten Educators?



## Stressed Out

- A new survey of more than 30,000 U.S. teachers finds that most of them report high levels of stress and low levels of autonomy.
  - 78% express overwhelming levels of stress.
  - Chronic stress is a primary contributor to the development of mental illness.

## Impact

- **Counting the Cost:**
  - 77% consider leaving the field of teaching
  - 78% report missing one to three days of work due to mental health concerns
  - 16% report missing anywhere from 4 days to 6 months due to mental health concerns
  - 53% believe this is negatively impacting their job performance and student learning.

## So, Who's The IP?

- 20% of school aged children struggling with mental illness.
- 20% of adults of child bearing age struggling with mental illness.
- 80% of educators struggling with severe stress and anxiety.
- The chances of a mentally ill adult having a mentally ill child being educated by a potentially mentally ill teacher are **getting higher all of the time.**
- **We need to know how to work effectively with the mental illness while at the same time managing our own stress.**

## Who's The IP

- So who is the IP?
  - Sometimes it's the parent.
  - Sometimes it's your staff.
  - Sometimes it's the principal.
  - But one thing is for certain...
    - It is never YOU!

## Who Comes First?

- During the safety briefing on every plane journey adults are reminded that, in case of an emergency, they are to secure their own oxygen masks before they help their children fit theirs. Why? Because it helps you look after children more effectively.
- The same is true of teachers when we discuss the need to maintain good mental health.

## MYTH #1

- **Most Difficult People Are Mentally Ill**
  - Truthfully only a small fraction of the individuals you have difficulty with suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder.
  - But, it is much easier and safer to assume they are ALL mentally ill.

## Working Effectively

- Working with the mentally ill is not about designing appropriate policy or a rigid practice.
- Working with the mentally ill is a very “person centered” process that will be unique to each individual.

## MYTH #2

- If you could just empathize or sympathize with a mentally ill individual, you would be able to work with them more effectively.
  - Empathize- refers to understanding their experience and feeling what they feel.
  - Sympathize- refers to feeling sorry for them and taking pity on them.

## Working Effectively

- A Strategic Problem Solving Model

- Recognize the impairment.
- Study the communication patterns of the individual.
- Seek out the themes that drive them and their perceived needs.
- Generate accommodations and adjust your communication style based on your observations.
- Prepare and Inform your team.
- Implement your plan.
- Assess
- **Disclaimer-** the best laid plan will often times never be enough. Severely mentally ill individuals suffer setbacks as a part of their disability.

## A Strategic Problem Solving Model

- Recognize the Impairment

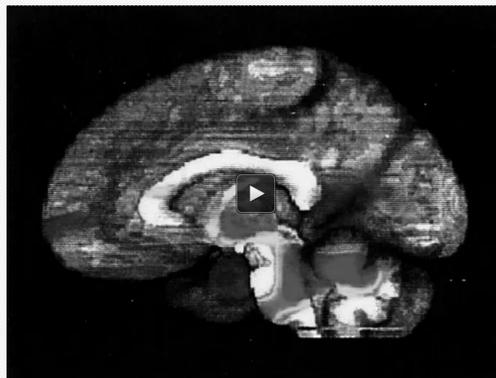
- Look for the evidence of reciprocity in communication.
  - Remember the “kind for kind” nature of human communication.
  - Mirror Neurons



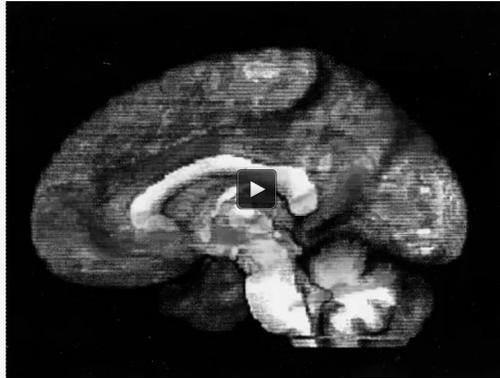
## A Strategic Problem Solving Model

- Recognize the Impairment
  - Look for the evidence of reciprocity in communication.
    - Remember the “kind for kind” nature of human communication.
  - If it doesn’t feel right at the onset something IS likely wrong.
  - If you start feeling frustrated by the interactions you may have missed your window to intervene early.
    - Frustration is quickly followed by other less fruitful feelings such as anger, fear, disgust and depression.

## The Frustrated/Angry Brain



## The Need for Joy

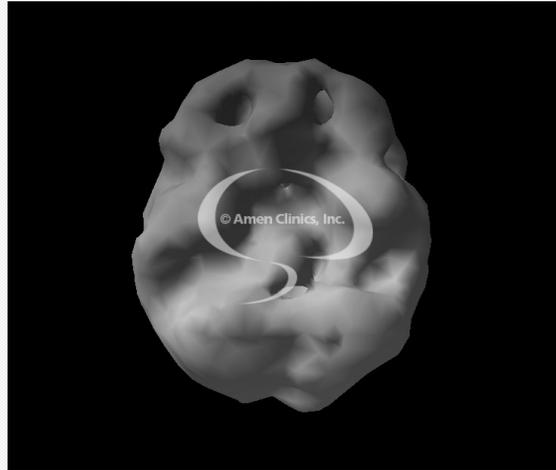


## A Strategic Problem Solving Model

- Study the communication patterns of the individual.
  - We are all generally predictable in our communication patterns.
  - People struggling with mental illness may appear unpredictable but are generally much MORE rigid in their adherence to specific patterns of communication.
  - Increasing levels of stress in the absence of any effective coping mechanisms typically results in diminished problem solving skills and communication on a largely emotional level.

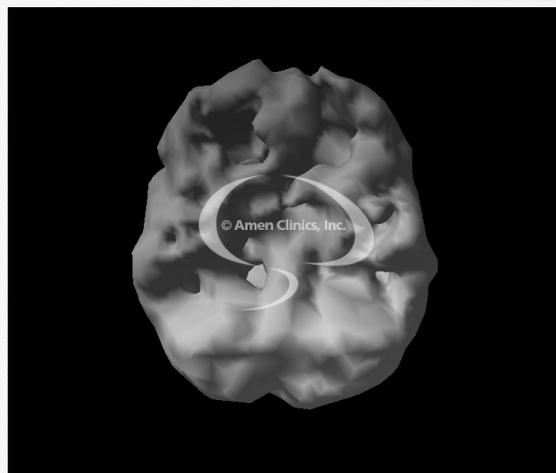
ADD ADHD Combined At Rest

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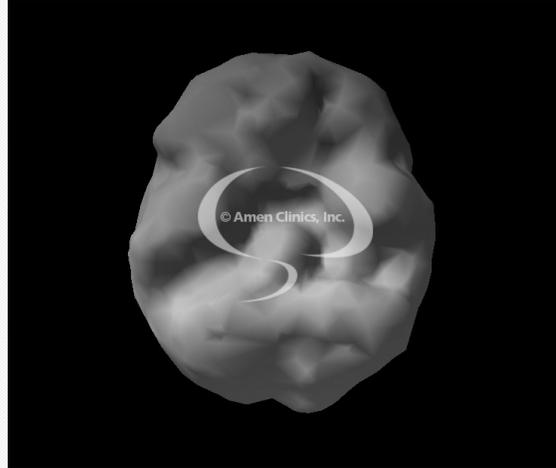
ADD ADHD Combined Concentrating

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## ADD ADHD Combined With Treatment

25



## MYTH #3

- Mentally ill individuals are not in control of their actions.
  - The illness will many times have exactly the opposite effect.
  - With decreased problem solving skills and a limited ability to communicate, these individuals will attempt to compensate through increasing their level of control.
  - Until the level of their perceived stress is diminished, their attempts to control will block productive communication.

## MYTH #4

- Mentally ill individuals are better at organizing their thoughts and communicating their needs when you require them to follow specific timelines, adhere to meeting norms and follow specific agendas.
  - Uh, no.
  - Timelines tend to increase stress.
  - Stress makes you stupid.
    - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYae3ZAAbLc>

## A Strategic Problem Solving Model

- Seek out themes that drive them and their perceived needs.
  - All communication is needs based.
  - Our failure to identify and meet the needs of these individuals will result in the continuation of the problem.
  - Think of how we respond to an infant's cry.
  - Until we figure out what the need is the crying will continue.
  - Meet the need and the crying stops.

**MYTH #5**

- What a mentally ill person asks for is synonymous with what they need.
  - This is a common misperception.
  - Need is not immediately obvious in people with limited communicative ability.
  - Often individuals will look for pain relief.
  - Think of what you do to relieve stress.

**MYTH #6**

- Having a good relationship with a mentally ill individual is all you need to communicate effectively.
  - “Good” is a relative term based largely on the perception of the individuals in relationship.
  - Relationships can be maladaptive.
  - In a mentally ill person’s mind a good relationship is one in which you give them whatever they ask for.

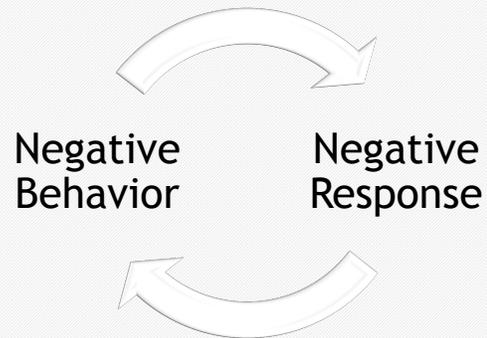
## A Strategic Problem Solving Model

- Generate accommodations and adjust your communication style based on your observations.
  - As the individual in question is limited in their ability to respond, you are the one needing to adjust your communication style.
  - Embrace the Horror- you will need to take complete responsibility for figuring out the problem.
  - While you may be at a point where you would welcome a forced placement or administrative intervention, they are limited solutions.

## Before, During, After (BDA)

- You have power at three different times in the Response Cycle:
  - Before the interaction takes place.
  - During the interaction.
  - After the interaction has ended.

## Conflict Cycle

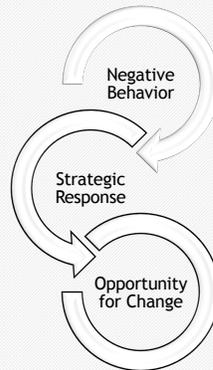


## The Conflict Cycle

- Arguing with a person struggling with a mental illness will always leave you feeling hopeless.
  - My Grandfather always said: “When you wrestle with a pig, both of you will get dirty, and only one of you will enjoy it.”



## Strategic Response



## A Strategic Problem-Solving Model

- Prepare/Inform your team.
  - Many a plan has failed due to poor preparation or a lack of communication with the necessary people.
  - You may have someone figured out, but unless the team knows what you know, your solution will be doomed to failure.
  - Include all team members, one loose cannon can sink your ship.

## A Strategic Problem-Solving Model

- Implement your plan.
  - Fidelity is critical.
  - If you have gone through the previous steps you have a great deal of time invested in your strategy.
  - Whether the strategy works or not, fidelity in implementation is key to future problem solving.

## A Strategic Problem-Solving Model

- Assess.
  - The effectiveness of your intervention can be assessed through direct observation of the individual's behavior.
  - Look for obvious changes in their level of engagement, their demeanor, or willingness to discuss previous topics the team had recognized as off limits.
  - Homeruns are great but a base hit must be recognized as progress towards your ultimate goal.

## A Strategic Problem-Solving Model

- Celebrate your success!
  - Your team has been through a great deal.
  - They need to be congratulated for their efforts.
  - Drinks are on the Principal!

## MYTH #7

- You should never confront a mentally ill individual because of their fragile nature.
  - Confrontation is a necessary component of any team process.
  - The method of confrontation may need to be adapted according to the needs of the individual.

## Defining Mental Illness

- Adults and children with mental illness have long been the victims of severe social stigmas, based on the assumption that they had a moral deficiency.
- Today, professionals recognize that most individuals with mental illness suffer from a biological imbalance of the chemicals in the brain; this is why many medications are effective in treating mental illness.
- Other contributing factors to mental illness include medical conditions, **stress**, **trauma**, severe childhood abuse, prolonged substance abuse, exposure to toxins, and genetically inherited traits.

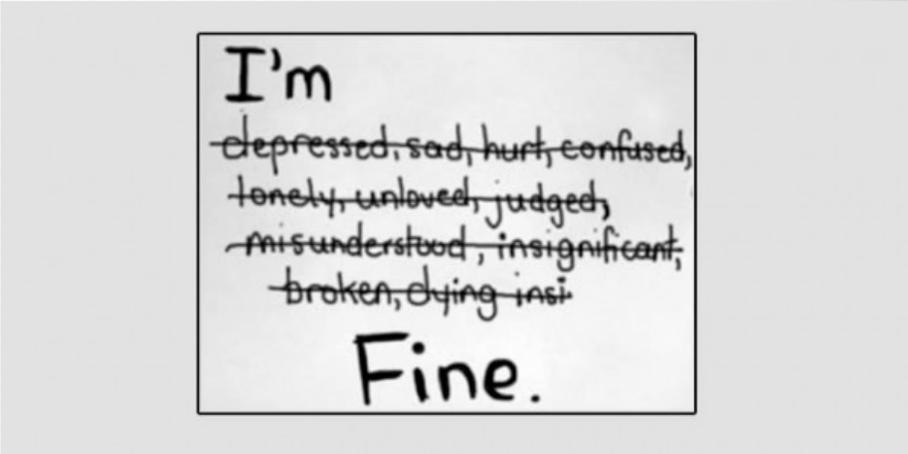
## Mental Health Conditions

- Three Main Categories
  - Mood Disorders
  - Anxiety Disorders
  - Personality Disorders

## Mood Disorders

- This family of mental health disorders is associated with Depression in all its varied forms including Dysthymia, Cyclothymia and Bipolar conditions.
- Myth
  - Depression = Sad or Withdrawn

## Conditioned Response



I'm  
~~depressed, sad, hurt, confused,~~  
~~lonely, unloved, judged,~~  
~~misunderstood, insignificant,~~  
~~broken, dying inside~~  
Fine.

## Depressive Interpretation

- Depression can turn good things into bad by applying a meaning that harms us.
- For example, if I phone someone and leave a message and they don't get back to me I can tell myself this may be because:

## Depressive Interpretation

1. ...they are away.
2. ...they haven't checked their messages.
3. ...their cell phone isn't working or they called me on another line.
4. Or: ...they didn't phone back because they don't want to talk to me because they are mad at me or don't like me!

*Any of these reasons could be true, but people suffering from depression will tend to choose 4), or a similarly depressing explanation.*

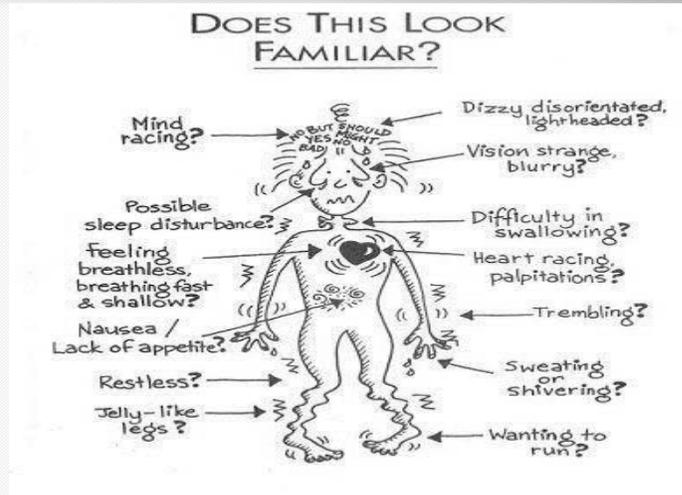
## THINGS TO REMEMBER

- People suffering from A Mood Disorder may:
  - Feel close to tears at all times.
  - Demonstrate a lack of interest.
  - Have gone without sleep for days.
  - Be experiencing feelings of worthlessness and excessive guilt.
  - Have difficulties concentrating and making decisions.
- To communicate effectively:
  - Remain positive even when tears come. Pass the Kleenex.
  - Understand this is a symptom.
  - Be compassionate, they are stressed.
  - Stay focused on what can be done not on what they have failed to do.
  - Be direct, repeat as needed to assure understanding.

## ANXIETY DISORDERS

- This family of mental health disorders is associated with conditions like PTSD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Agoraphobia and various specific phobias.
- Myth
  - Anxiety = Timidity or Shyness

## What's Really Going On?



## THINGS TO REMEMBER

- People suffering from an Anxiety Disorder may:
  - Worry excessively about many things.
  - Feel keyed up or on the edge.
  - Have difficulty concentrating.
  - Be irritable.
- To communicate effectively:
  - Empathize with concerns related to student
  - Keep meetings small and short.
  - Again, be direct and repeat as needed.
  - Understand this is only a symptom.

## BDO

- What we **Believe**
- Influence the **Decisions** we make
- Which determine the **Outcomes** we experience.

## What Do You Believe?

- About someone who is:
  - Quiet?
  - Aggressive?
  - Screaming?
  - Questioning?
  - Complaining?

## Exercise

What happened here?



## PERSONALITY DISORDERS

- A Personality Disorder is an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment.

## PERSONALITY DISORDERS

- Personality Disorders include:
  - Paranoid Personality Disorder
  - Schizoid Personality Disorder
  - Schizotypal Personality Disorder
  - Antisocial Personality Disorder
  - Borderline Personality Disorder
  - Histrionic Personality Disorder
  - Narcissistic Personality Disorder
  - Avoidant Personality Disorder
  - Dependent Personality Disorder
  - Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder
  - Personality Disorder NOS

## THINGS TO REMEMBER

- These people truly are disabled.
- Personality Disorders are **pervasive and inflexible**.
- Avoid counter-transference, emotional reactions either highly negative or empathetic that may result from working with a mentally ill person over time. Avoid allowing your feelings to dictate your responses to these individuals.

## DEPENDENT PERSONALITY DISORDER

- Disorder is described a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior related to an excessive need to be taken care of.
  - Recognize the Impairment.
  - Study Their Communication Patterns.
  - What Do They Need?
  - Generate Accommodations.

## Histrionic Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking.
  - Recognize the Impairment.
  - Study Their Communication Patterns.
  - What Do They Need?
  - Generate Accommodations.

## Narcissistic Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.
  - Recognize the Impairment.
  - Study Their Communication Patterns.
  - What Do They Need?
  - Generate Accommodations.

## Borderline Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects and marked impulsivity.
  - Recognize the Impairment.
  - Study Their Communication Patterns.
  - What Do They Need?
  - Generate Accommodations.

## Antisocial Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others.
  - **RUN!**
    - Recognize the Impairment.
    - Study Their Communication Patterns.
    - What Do They Need?
    - Generate Accommodations.

## TOOLS FOR WORKING EFFECTIVELY

- Anything you learn about dealing effectively with a difficult person should be immediately passed on to staff working with the individual.
- Adopt a problem-solving model.
- Remember an emotional response on your part may feel right but it rarely leads to solution.
- Assume they are all mentally ill and it will improve your communication skills with everyone.

## TOOLS FOR WORKING EFFECTIVELY

- Leave your ego and YOUR NEEDS at the door.
- Problem-solving is best accomplished in a team environment.
- Stay on center emotionally. An emotional response is an indicator of counter transference.
- End a meeting prior to reaching you or your team's tolerance threshold.

## TOOLS FOR WORKING EFFECTIVELY

- Celebrate your victories but remain vigilant.
- Don't just listen—study.
- Practice the giving of Grace regularly.
- If you have a problem with changing your communication pattern ask yourself the following question:
  - “If they are mentally ill, what's my excuse?”