

Supported Education for Consumers of Mental Health Services

Supported education provides supports for individuals with mental health disabilities to take advantage of skill, career, education and interpersonal development opportunities within a normalizing academic environment. This paper explores what Supported Education is and how it can benefit those with mental health challenges seeking to further their education and professional choices.



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What It Is

In the 1970's the deinstitutionalization movement took hold and individuals with psychiatric disabilities began to be discharged to live in residential settings in the community. Day services, clubhouses, day treatment programs, partial hospitalization programs and vocational rehabilitation services began to emerge. Ultimately, more normalized approaches to services began to evolve that included programs that were integrated into the community and that lead to steady jobs and integrated educational opportunities (Anthony & Blanch, 1987; Anthony & Unger, 1991).

The number of individuals with psychiatric disabilities returning to postsecondary schools has increased over the past few years. Researchers generally assume that two things have made this possible: new medications have helped them control their symptoms, with fewer side effects; and the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) has made it easier for students with mental health needs to receive accommodations so they can remain in school (Rehabilitation Through Education, Karen Unger, Ph.D., 2009).

Supported education provides supports to assist people with psychiatric disabilities to take advantage of skill, career, education and interpersonal development opportunities within a normalizing academic environment. Supported Education Programs are community partnerships made up of mental health consumers, their network of supporters, agencies, providers and colleges and universities with the intention of pooling resources to maximize educational opportunities and employment outcomes for persons with psychiatric disabilities. Supported Education programs modify existing educational environments by making them more receptive and supportive to students with psychiatric disabilities (Supported Employment and Supported Education Summit Meeting, State Department of Rehabilitation, Sacramento, California, 2003). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) of the federal government has recognized supported education as an exemplary practice. That means it is a practice that has a body of research that documents its positive outcomes and offers program models.

The term “supported education” is based on the definition of supported employment as defined by The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986. Supported Education is described as “education in integrated settings for people with severe psychiatric disabilities for whom post-secondary education has not traditionally occurred or for people for whom postsecondary education has been interrupted or intermittent as a result of severe psychiatric disability, and who, because of their handicap, need ongoing support services to be successful in the educational environment.”

This definition is not reflective of the strengths-based language (modern language that focuses or starts with the strengths of an individual instead of their needs, disabilities, or weaknesses) used today. However, it did open the door for consumers of mental health services to receive secondary education, so they could develop expertise in the professions of their choice. Experts in supported education state that in the past 15 years an emphasis has been placed on supported employment and helping consumers with disabilities to return to work. Reportedly, this has been a successful step to promote recovery. This model has transferred into the educational setting for consumers of mental health services and promoted new opportunities in their educational aspirations.

Supported Education has the potential to:

- Provide access to a normalizing learning environment within which individuals with psychiatric disabilities can experience a wide range of people and social situations.
- Provide access to the cultural and recreational resources available in educational settings.
- Provide opportunities to strengthen basic competencies necessary to succeed in school and competitive employment.
- Provide opportunities to explore individual interests relating to career development and vocational choice.
- Provide opportunities to earn degrees, certificates, or vocational training that will lead to employment and careers.

(Supported Employment and Supported Education Summit Meeting, State Department of Rehabilitation, Sacramento, California, 2003)



Why It Is Important

Mental illness often begins when young adults are completing high school and moving on to college. The onset of the illness creates a developmental lag and slows the career trajectory to which most young adults aspire. Supported education was developed to avoid or remediate this problem. It is a way to catch up, so career goals can be met, and fulfilling and appropriate work that provides a living wage can be found. Supported education provides a system that encourages youth and young adults to continue their developmental path without interruption.

Although colleges and universities provide accommodations and academic counseling to all students, they usually do not recognize the level of support many students with mental health challenges need to successfully complete their education goals, realize successful employment, and enter career opportunities that promote independence and recovery.

Little formal research exists in the area of Supported Education. However, within the limited research that does exist, there is much to suggest hope that future research would in fact find it to be both popular and effective.

National research indicates that supported education students report a significantly greater level of satisfaction with their quality of life than other students with mental health care needs who did not receive support. They report higher levels of contentment with their living situation, finances, daily activities, social relations and personal contacts than those who are not going to school. Reportedly, people who are enrolled in a supported education program have had decreased incidence of hospitalization and more than half of them are employed. (Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and mental Health Services Administration, 2008)

There is evidence to suggest that individuals with psychiatric disabilities, when compared to the general population, have a lower rate of post-secondary degree completion. Preliminary evidence indicates that supported education can assist individuals to identify educational goals, find and link to resources needed to complete their education and assist them in coping with barriers to completing their education (e.g., Corrigan, Barr, Driscoll, & Boyle, 2008).

More recently, rehabilitation practitioners have realized that many adults with psychiatric disabilities have the desire and the motivation and educational background to attend college (Hazel K, Herman SE, Mowbray CT: Characteristics of adults with serious mental illness in a public mental health system. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 42:518-525, 1991). Because of this, systems have recognized that helping individuals re-start their postsecondary educational pursuits is a desirable, valid, and viable option (Moxley D, Mowbray C, Brown KS: Supported education, in *Psychiatric Rehabilitation in Practice*. Edited by Flexer R, Solomon P. New York, Butterworth, 1993).

Three challenge areas remain in the realization of a successful Supported Education program. These include:

- Access: Effectively linking consumers of mental health services to educational programs within the school, college, or university of their choice.
- Retention: Services for students that support their needs so they can complete their educational program.
- Outcomes: Helping students to meet their professional and vocational goals with meaningful and productive employment opportunities.



What It Can Do

Many people with mental illness are asking for Supported Education services. As they have previously learned about the benefits of job coaches and preparatory classes that are available to assist them in returning to work, consumers of mental health services returning to school recognize the benefit of Supported Education and an environment that responds with support to their individual and unique needs.

Supported Education is a concept grounded in disability education philosophy that

promotes the rights of every individual, regardless disability, to access publicly funded education. By law, students with a verifiable disability must be given accommodations. An accommodation is a "modification to academic requirements as necessary to ensure that such requirements do not discriminate against students with disabilities, or have the effect of excluding students solely on the basis of the disability." Through modifications in the typical secondary education system, consumers of mental health services have an increased chance to succeed. With Supported Education, these modifications are over and above existing educational supports, services and accommodations for students with disabilities.

Every Supported Education program will vary in structure according to the unique needs and assets of each community and the participating partnership organizations and colleges and universities. Supported education may include:

- Outreach and Recruitment
- Specialized transitional classes
- Educational coaching
- Special crisis intervention procedures
- Support groups
- Award ceremonies
- Book and scholarship funds
- Note takers in the classroom
- Books on tape
- Changes in timelines for assignments
- Incomplete rather than failing grades if the student needs a medical leave or withdrawal
- Registration assistance
- Academic counseling that includes choosing classes that meet the individual academic goals with consideration of mental health needs
- Assistance in developing strategies for problem solving
- Assistance with managing disclosure issues
- Advocacy with faculty for accommodations
- Special orientations
- Identified counselors and instructors familiar with psychiatric disabilities
- Liaison and service coordination between the college and mental health and rehabilitation providers
- Peer counseling
- Clubs and social activities
- Newsletters and communications
- Research and evaluation
- Use of tape recorders
- Test-taking facilitation
- Changes in format or method of completing assignments
- Arrangements to leave and return to class during a class period
- Assistance in applying for financial aid
- Assistance in managing time and deadlines
- Assistance in applying for forgiveness of previous loans because of disability status
- Assistance in identifying learning disabilities
- Emotional support

Although support services are not required by law, they are often instrumental in helping a student with mental health challenges remain in their educational program.



What You Can Do

It is important that you explore all of the supports and laws available to support you in your educational efforts. Below are a few suggestions to get you started on gathering resources and examining options so you can make an informed choice of what is best for you.

Call your nearest college and ask:

- Do you have a Supported Education program for students with a psychiatric disability?
- Who would I contact?
- What Do I Need to Do to learn more about what you offer?

Or, you can call your state Department of Education and ask if they know of schools or higher education programs that offer Supported Education

Once you find a program, it is important that you follow through on all requests, forms, requirements, and appointments. If you feel you need assistance, ask the school or your mental health service provider for assistance.



More Resources

Supported Education Strategies for People with Severe Mental Illness: A Review of Evidence Based Practice

The article reviews extant literature related to the study of evidence based practice of the provision of supported education to the mentally ill and provides a chronological history of efforts from various institutions and mental health and educational facilities in North America.

http://www.psychosocial.com/IJPR_11/Supported_Ed_Strategies_Leonard.html

Supported Education for Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities

This presentation of supported education is intended to a) situate supported education models in relationship to other mental health programs and to related interventions by educational institutions; b) outline what is known about the extent of implementation of supported education programs, and c) summarize the evidence base for supported education.

<http://www.cimh.org/Portals/0/Documents/Adult/EPB-IDDT/CiMH-IDDT-Supported-Education.pdf>

ADA Home Page

Information and technical assistance on the American's with Disabilities Act

<http://www.ada.gov/>



The CAFÉ TA Center is a program of The Family Café, a cross-disability organization that has been connecting individuals with information, training and resources for more than twelve years. The Center is supported by SAMHSA to operate one of its five national technical assistance centers; providing technical assistance, training, and resources that facilitate the restructuring of the mental health system through effective consumer

directed approaches for adults with serious mental illnesses across the country. The project utilizes a peer-driven approach that is founded upon strategies and interventions consistent with self-determination and recovery models and guided by expert consultants and national technical assistance professionals. The CAFÉ TA Center target areas includes workforce development, supported education, and the dissemination of resources and training that will ensure consumer leaders contribute to the system's capacity to make adjustments at every level to ensure a responsive system of care.

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