Dealing with Employees with Psychiatric Disabilities

Barbara A. Lee
Rutgers University
- 1 in 5 Americans have a diagnosed or diagnosable psychiatric disorder
- Psychiatric disorders comprise 4 of the top 10 conditions resulting in work disability
- 20 percent of all ADA claims filed with the EEOC specify a psychiatric disorder
Issues for Workers with Psychiatric Disorders

- Stigma
- Stereotyping
- Co-worker fear
- Discrimination
- Shunning
- Harassment
Issues for Workers with Psychiatric Disorders

Manager preferences

- Physical disabilities
- Sensory disabilities
- Anything but psychiatric
- Psychiatric disabilities
What the ADA Does Not Protect

- Workplace violence
- Unprofessional behavior
- Unexcused absences or tardiness
- Performance problems
- Rude or noncollegial conduct
Demonstrating that the disorder is an ADA “disability”

- Mitigating measures
- Substantially limited
- Major life activity
  - Work
  - Interacting with others
Special Legal Issues for Employees

- Demonstrating that the individual is “qualified”
  - Can perform all essential functions
  - Can interact positively with supervisors and co-workers (and students)
  - Can maintain appropriate attendance and promptness
  - Is not a “direct threat”
Special Legal Issues for Employees

- Demonstrating that a reasonable accommodation is available and that it will work
  - Removing stressors from work environment
  - Transferring to a different supervisor (?)
  - Allowing to work at home or in some other quiet location
  - Reorganizing work to transfer functions that are difficult for the employee
Employer’s Rights in Dealing with Employees with Psychiatric Disorders

- Performance standards
- Workplace behavior standards
- Attendance and promptness standards
- Scheduling issues
- Eligibility for leaves of absence
Dealing with Faculty with Disabilities

- Develop or reinforce performance expectations for faculty—in faculty handbook
- Ensure consistency in faculty workload policies—exceptions for nondisabled suggest you can make exceptions for disabled faculty as well
- Develop a policy on faculty tardiness or absence from class
Dealing with Faculty with Disabilities

- Respond promptly to instances where faculty miss class or are frequently late
- Document all instances of noncompliance with performance requirements for all faculty
- Adopt in full or in modified form the AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics
Dealing with Faculty with Disabilities

- Confront faculty whose behavior is disruptive, either in the classroom or in faculty meetings, etc.
- Document failures by individual faculty to meet research or service obligations
- Consider any requests for accommodations carefully, even if you conclude they are impracticable
Dealing with Faculty with Disabilities

- Notify your supervisor and university counsel if you believe the faculty member’s behavior is dangerous, seriously disruptive, or problematic in other ways.

- Learn about your institution’s counseling services for faculty and keep the information handy.
Dealing with Staff with Psychiatric Disabilities

- Ensure that job descriptions are accurate and up to date
- Add behavioral requirements to job descriptions (including courtesy, professional behavior), especially for positions requiring contact with students or other staff
- Make sure that supervisors are trained about dealing with workers with disabilities
Dealing with Staff with Psychiatric Disabilities

- Enforce attendance and tardiness policies consistently
- Address problematic behavior immediately, and document the behavior and your response
- Ensure that no one uses inappropriate language, in or out of the employee’s presence, such as “crazy” or “lunatic”
Dealing with Staff with Psychiatric Disabilities

- Talk with the individual, expressing your concern for the behavior and its effect on the workplace
- Do not try to “diagnose” the reason for the problematic behavior
- Use your disciplinary tools for any problematic behavior, irrespective of the cause
Dealing with Staff with Psychiatric Disabilities

- Avoid the temptation to “help” the individual, as it may lead to a “regarded as disabled” claim.
- If a staff member has sought treatment for a psychiatric disorder, be as supportive as you can while insisting that performance and conduct expectations are met by all employees.