

Mental Health FAQs for an Academic Context FOR 2111

Compiled by: Miriam Butt, Erlinde Meertens & George Walkden

Q. What is mental illness?

Mental illnesses or disorders are psychological conditions associated with distress, disability, or loss of autonomy. Common disorders include depression, anxiety disorder, and bipolar disorder. Usually, a mental disorder goes beyond a normal emotional response to an event (e.g. grief at the death of a family member, stress caused by a specific deadline at work) and persists for a longer period of time. According to the WHO, about one in four people in the world will suffer from a mental disorder at some point in their lives, and in the DEGS1 study in Germany, more than a third of the participants suffered from a mental disorder during the one-year time span covered by the survey.

Mental health problems are health problems. This means that the right way to identify and deal with them is by seeking help from health professionals – normally, in the first instance, your doctor. Psychotherapy and medication are the two main avenues of treatment.

When you are ready for professional health treatment, it is a good option to make an appointment with your GP (*Hausarzt*), who can identify what kind of specialist will be best in your case. For internationals fearing a language barrier, the Welcome Center has a list of language specific specialists that could be helpful. If your language is not on the list and you do not feel comfortable in German or English, there are options to go look for professional mental health services that are offered via an on-line format.

Q. Can I deal with a mental disorder on my own?

No, and you shouldn't expect to be able to. As with other health problems, lifestyle changes (e.g. diet, exercise, relaxation) can help to alleviate symptoms, but will not make the disorder go away on its own except in the mildest cases. Advice like “think positive thoughts” or “just pull yourself together” is at best useless and at worst hugely counterproductive.

A sense of embarrassment or refusal to acknowledge the situation often prevents people from seeking treatment. Since mental disorders aren't something we have conscious control over, and are very common, there's no shame at all in having one. A useful first step is to talk to someone sympathetic who you trust, such as a friend or family member. Talking about it won't solve

the problem, but may make it easier to figure out what treatment you need, and may make you more comfortable with the idea of seeking treatment.

Q. What do I do if I suspect that someone I am working with has an undiagnosed mental health problem?

If you are on very good terms with the person, you may want to raise the issue with them as something to consider. In general, though, you should avoid doing so, since this is (unfortunately) often interpreted as a criticism or a personal attack. As with other health problems, diagnosis should be carried out by professionals, not by lay people. If there is a conflict between you and the person in question, you should follow the usual conflict resolution guidelines.

Q. Does getting treatment for mental health problems prevent me from being able to join the German civil service (Verbeamtung)?

There is an enduring myth that receiving psychotherapy will prevent you from getting a civil service position (e.g. professor, teacher) in Germany, and in the past this has caused people to avoid psychotherapy entirely. Though it used to be the case that people could be denied civil service status on the basis of past mental health problems, since 2013 this has been illegal throughout Germany: you can only be denied entry into the civil service if it can be proven with overwhelming likelihood that you will become incapable of working well before retirement age. In fact, untreated mental health problems (which doctors are good at diagnosing) do more damage to your case for Verbeamtung than receiving treatment such as psychotherapy, as the latter is an indicator that the problem is under control. So DO NOT avoid getting psychotherapy because of fears about Verbeamtung, and DO NOT lie about having had it.

As a concrete example: one of the authors of this FAQ, George, had received psychotherapy in the recent past, and was verbeamtet in 2017, without any problem whatsoever.

See <http://scienceblogs.de/gesundheits-check/2015/10/17/psychotherapie-nichtverbeamtung-nein/> for more information.

Q. Who can I talk to within my department or the FOR2111 about academic/research problems resulting from mental health issues?

Your first port of call to talk about mental health related academic problems is your supervisor. In the context of the research unit or other projects, this will also generally be the PI of the project you are in. Experience has shown that

many problems can be solved or a better work environment can be created with just the first step of talking to your supervisor/PI in confidence. If you do not feel comfortable with talking to your supervisor/PI (or have a conflict with them), the next port of call in the FOR context is the FOR speaker (and/or members of the steering committee). You can also talk to any other PI that you feel comfortable with. Note that the PIs are obliged to keep confidential information to themselves, so you don't have to worry they will tell others or be indiscreet. However, be aware that none of the professors within a department or research unit are mental health specialists and therefore none of them can help you solve medical problems. Still, talking about it could help you with making adjustments within your professional life that make it easier to handle mental health problems. You can also ask your psychotherapist, if you're seeing one, how to pursue handling professional problems that are mental-health related and how to communicate them.

Q. How do I deal with (potential) academic conflicts and problems arising out mental health problems?

As stated above, the first port of call should be your supervisor/PI or the speaker of the research unit. We have found that there is a perception among PhD students that all professors within a department or research unit will automatically "have each other's backs" and that this results in a reluctance to approach professors with problems that need conflict resolution or an adjustment of the work life/atmosphere. However, the reality is that professors tend to be focused on conflict resolution and finding good ways forward that will enable PhD students to pursue their degree and their careers as best as possible. There is an awareness that nobody is perfect, that academic life has high stress potential and that misunderstandings can happen. Nevertheless, if you do not feel comfortable talking to somebody in your immediate research environment, the option of approaching an Ombudsperson for PhD students is always available to you. The university has three of these, see below. Experience with these offices has shown that PhD students can be assured of a sympathetic, discreet and conflict-resolution oriented approach. But also note that none of the Ombudspersons are mental health professionals. They will do their best to effect conflict resolution, sometimes via the help of mediation. This can help resolve issues and lead to an overall better work/research situation, but cannot serve as a substitute for professional mental health support.

<https://www.uni-konstanz.de/en/research/research-profile/academic-integrity-and-quality-assurance/ombudspersons-for-doctoral-research/>

Q. What general sources of support are there for mental health problems in academia?

As stated above, it's good to talk to sympathetic friends about the problem, and you should normally talk to your doctor in the first instance. Listed here are some additional resources that might be useful for academics at Konstanz.

Information and services for students at the University of Konstanz:

<https://www.uni-konstanz.de/studieren/rund-ums-studium/studieren-mit-behinderungen-und-chronischen-erkrankungen/studieren-mit-psychischen-erkrankungen/>

At the University of Konstanz, Seezeit offers psychotherapeutic appointments:

<https://www.seezeit.com/beratung/psychotherapeutische-beratung/>

The IBB provides advice for people in the Konstanz area:

<https://www.lrakn.de/bildung+soziales/anlaufstellen+beratungsangebote/ibb>