Executive Functioning Skills: The Real Reasons Why Students with Mental Health Conditions May Struggle Academically

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Agenda for today’s session....

- Define executive functioning skills
- Review of common executive functioning skills
- Specific strategies to develop self-management skills
Students with Mental Health conditions (MHC)...

- Large and fast
- Higher risk:
  - Low educational attainment
  - Lower grade point average
  - Higher rates of drop out regardless of psychiatric disability, geographic location, & education level
- Life long impact:
  - Human capital development
  - Future employment (unemployment & underemployment)
Research tells us...

Unique clustering of obstacles:

- Navigating an unfamiliar service system
- Weak study skills & inconsistent academic knowledge
- Negative perception of self
- Lack of transportation
- Faculty attitudes
- Disclosure dilemmas
- High academic anxiety
- Monitoring & managing symptoms & wellness strategies
- Medication side effects
- Figuring out how to obtain necessary supports
- Finding new supports on campus
- Internal & external stigma
- COGNITIVE DEFICITS & Executive functioning difficulties
What are the skills with which students struggle?

Barriers endorsed by students in our multi-site SEd study (Mullen, 2011)

Over 70% of respondents:
- Concentration (85%),
- Time management (77%),
- Stamina (75%),
- Organization (71%),
- Prioritizing tasks (70%)

Over 50% of respondents:
- Difficulty memorizing information
- Managing psychiatric symptoms
- Studying for exams
- Taking exams
- Preparing for class
- Writing papers
- Taking notes
- Researching information
- Meeting deadlines
 Terminology

- **Cognition** - A set of mental processes that underlies learning, including attention, memory, comprehending language, verbal and visual recognition, computation, reasoning, and problem solving (Green et al., 2004).

- **Executive Functions** ("cognitive control system") - An umbrella term for the cognitive processes that help thought and action (Friedman et al., 2008).
What are the “functions” in “Executive Functions”?

1. **Planning** – plotting a sequence of steps to achieve a goal
2. **Reasoning** – thinking through info in a logical way
3. **Attentional control** – choosing how one directs their attention
4. **Inhibiting automatic responses** – resisting urges that lead to undesired outcomes
5. **Working memory** – the ability to hold and process information

Let’s take a closer look...
They do Exist!

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING LIMITATIONS
EF limitations can be more problematic than symptoms
EFs are Crucial to Post-secondary Success

1. **Planning** → large projects, papers, group work, voicing what you need, time management

2. **Reasoning** → assignments involving critical thinking, speculation, internship performance

3. **Attentional control** → sitting in class, reading long text documents

4. **Inhibiting automatic responses** → staying on task, follow through, “grit”, keeping deadlines, acknowledging classroom norms

5. **Working memory** → note-taking, exams, class participation, clinical practice
There are Clues!

Look for changes in:

- Duration
- Severity
- Baseline behavior

1. **Planning** → late to class, poor quality assignments (rushed), late assignments, missed exams
2. **Reasoning** → trouble connecting previously discussed ideas with current ideas, poor essay answers on exams
3. **Attentional control** → Staring off into space, repeating questions, unfinished assignments
4. **Inhibiting automatic responses** → speaks out of turn (interrupts), preoccupied with technology
5. **Working memory** → “What was the point I was trying to make?” lack of participation, difficulty holding on to what’s read/seen/heard
EF limitations can be addressed

GOOD NEWS!
What is FAST?

- A manualized intervention based in the cognitive remediation literature
- CR refers to an intervention that “targets cognitive deficit using scientific principles of learning with the ultimate goal of improving functional outcomes” (McGurk et al., 2013)
  - Approaches vary in length, methods, and format
- Skill or strategy coaching focuses on teaching skills that can be used to improve cognitive performance with the aim of reducing the impact of impairment and enhancing performance on real-world cognitive tasks
- FAST is a modification of Beth Twamley’s CCT intervention for SE (Twamley et al., 2012)
Group Comparisons: Self-Reported Educational Difficulties
Educational Barriers Questionnaire, M. Mullen
Importance of Individualized Skill Development

FAST is successful because it develops goal-directed behavior:

• Roots all support strategies into the student’s current academic goals (semester and long-term)
• Explores what’s getting in the way of achieving their goals
• Individualizes skill development approaches & strategies that are aligned with their articulated barriers
• Practitioner uses their language and how they describe their barriers
What’s In The Manual?

- Strategies that help students develop self-management skills to reduce barriers in school and enhance performance
- Develop skills and strategies to **compensate** for cognitive barriers
- Tools for them to boost efficiency...work smarter, not harder
- Skills for them to practice that can improve cognitive functioning
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Selected FAST Self-Management Skills & Strategies

- Goal setting
  - Identification of goals that relate to areas of cognitive difficulty
- To-do lists
- Task linking
- Eisenhower's Principle: urgent vs important
  - Focus on figuring how to prioritize time and tasks
- Self-talk
- Calendaring:
  - the most important self-management skill
- Set Shifting vs Multi-Tasking
- Visualization
  - Encode-Store-Retrieve
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The Eisenhower Principle

Urgency/Importance

- Throughout the semester there are many tasks that students need to do in order to succeed.

- Some are important, some are urgent, some are both, and others are neither.

- Let’s look at these terms a little more closely:
  - Important tasks are ones that are critical to the achievement of your goals
  - Urgent tasks are often critical to the achievement of someone else’s goals
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Important</th>
<th>Q2 Important Goals</th>
<th>Less Urgent</th>
<th>More Urgent</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Examples: Problem prevention, Long-term projects/assignments, Finding your career path.</td>
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<th>Q1 Critical Activities</th>
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<td>Examples: Deadline-driven tasks, crises, resolving immediate problems.</td>
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<th>Less Important</th>
<th>Q3 Distractions</th>
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<td>Examples: Time wasters, surfing the net, chatting, etc.</td>
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<td>Examples: phone calls/emails/meetings/reports, certain pressing matters.</td>
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Activity: Determining How You Spend Your Time

➢ Meeting with a student who is applying for services.
➢ Beginning work on a large project due in six months.
➢ Catching up on facebook.
➢ Finishing an accommodation letter that is due at the end of the day.
➢ Re-organize your desk.
➢ Revising office policy/procedure to increase accessibility.
➢ Day to day follow up email responses to colleagues.
➢ Calling your family to let them know you’re working late.
➢ Chatting with co-workers
| More Important | Important Goals |
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Mental health conditions impact students in many ways.

Executive functioning issues cause trouble with planning, memory, reasoning.

Using targeted skill development we can compensate for these difficulties.
For more information or collaboration, contact us...

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References & Resources


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