Classroom Accommodations for Students with Narcolepsy

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Narcolepsy is a neurological sleep disorder caused by the brain’s inability to regulate the sleep/wake cycle. It is thought to affect about 1 in 2,000, or about 200,000 Americans. Symptoms include excessive daytime sleepiness (EDS), disrupted nighttime sleep, vivid dreams that intrude into waking hours, sleep paralysis, and cataplexy (a sudden loss of muscle tone triggered by strong emotions such as laughter). Narcolepsy is treated with medication and lifestyle management.

Narcolepsy usually develops in adolescence, where EDS is often mistaken for “normal teenage behavior” or laziness. Daytime sleepiness is worse during periods of inactivity and concentration, so young people with narcolepsy (PWN) may experience a variety of difficulties in school. Common problems include:

- Falling asleep in class
- Frequently late to school and/or class,
- Difficulty staying organized,
- Forgetting or not hearing instructions or assignments,
- Micro-sleep episodes and automatic behaviors in class,
- Cataplexy episodes
- Scheduling difficulties (struggling to attend or stay awake in an early morning class, for example)

Academic accommodations can help students with narcolepsy work around these challenges.

Helpful academic accommodations can include:

- **Note-taking assistance** - sleepy note-taking can produce unintelligible scribbles. A reliable classmate can be a back-up note taker and arrange to share a readable copy of his or her notes. Recording lectures may also be helpful.
- **Extra time on tests and quizzes** - sleep attacks and micro-sleep episodes can also make test taking more difficult. For example, a student may doze off or “zone out” in the middle of working out a math problem. When they “snap out of it” they have lost track of their work and have to start over. These lapses in attention can cost students time. Making arrangements in advance for extra time can make the situation less stressful.
- **Modified or flexible class schedules** - students with narcolepsy may feel drowsier at some times of the day than others. Working with school administrators to schedule challenging academic classes around these drowsy periods can improve students’ ability to pay attention.
- **Nap Time** - Even with effective medications, most PWN still find that twenty to thirty minute naps can help manage narcolepsy symptoms like EDS. Students with narcolepsy may want to make arrangements with a school nurse or other staff member to have space available for napping.

Accommodations 101:

There are two paths to academic accommodations: A “504 Plan” (from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973), and the Individual Education Plan (IEP). The two laws are slightly different, but both require public schools to create accommodations to help students with disabilities succeed. The laws are not mutually exclusive; students may benefit from one or both - it depends on the needs of the individual student.

A 504 plan is developed by parents and school staff to create accommodations for physical disabilities or medical conditions. Typically, it provides a specific list of accommodations or modifications for each class and gives guidelines for how each teacher should work with the student. The 504 plan must be reviewed at least once a year, so it grows with the student. It also applies to post-secondary education.

The IEP is linked to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and is designed to provide accommodations and specialized individual education for students with learning disabilities. An IEP requires an assessment by a licensed school psychologist. The plan is designed by special education teachers, school staff, and parents to set individual goals for a student to improve their academic performance. Transition planning is included in the IEP, but the plan terminates at high school graduation.