Many of the tutees you will work with have disabilities or mental illness. Both of these terms are VERY broad, and the range of needs and demands of these two groups will vary greatly. Because most of our tutees will not disclose that they have mental illness or some sort of a disability, and because we can NEVER ask a tutee if they have a disability or mental illness, as tutors we need to embrace tutoring techniques that benefit all of our clients, including those with disabilities or mental illness.

1. First of all, we need to remember that seeking help is something many of our tutees find difficult. There is, for many, a stigma attached to needing academic support, as well as a stigma attached to mental illness and disability. Our role as tutors is to make our tutee feel at ease, and feel respected. No matter how busy, make an effort to introduce yourself and ask your tutee his/her name. At the same time, never initiate physical contact with a tutee. The rapport you build in your first session will help make the tutee feel comfortable seeking help and guidance.

2. Check to see if the tutee has a file. Chances are the tutee has been to the TLC before. His/her previous tutor may have made some notes which provide pertinent information regarding necessary accommodations, particular challenges etc. If the tutee does not have a file, start one for the tutee and involve him/her in completing it at the beginning of a session to establish clear expectations and boundaries for the session. This will contribute to your tutee feeling that the TLC is serious about tracking and supporting growth and development. Documentation of any concerns is also important if we need to discuss a situation with counsellors or learning strategists. Remember that the Tutee Tracking Forms can be read by the tutee, so use objective, clear descriptors of what was covered in a session, as well as clear instructions for next steps.

3. Remember ALL tutees learn differently. For this reason, we should always adjust out tutoring style and incorporate tutoring methods which appeal to different learning styles. If a tutee does not seem to understand something you are telling him/her, try drawing a picture, making a diagram, playing a recording etc. The TLC has flashcards, audio-visual material, books, handouts, etc. Use them! Instead of making the tutee read what he/she has written, try reading it out loud to him/her. If the tutee seems to struggle with writing down ideas, try scribing for him/her as he/she dictates. Try brainstorming together. Ask the tutee questions. Divert the tutee’s questions back to the tutee and help the tutee formulate his/her own answers. If the tutee struggles to express his/her thoughts verbally, communicate in writing.

4. Find a space conducive to your tutee’s learning. If the tutee has limited vision, tutor in a bright space with good lighting. If the tutee has limited vision, read and scribe for him/her. If the tutee has limited hearing, and needs to read lips, sit close enough to the tutee that he/she can do so. Find out if the tutee would rather communicate using the UbiDuo and ask your Advisor how to use it. If the tutee needs a quiet space free of distractions, try to accommodate this. When the TLC is busy and there is no quiet space available, let the tutee know quieter times that might be more conducive to learning (i.e. early mornings, Friday afternoons at SJ)

5. Keep the tutee on track. Many of our tutees are easily distracted and have difficulty focusing on the task at hand. It is your role to politely steer them back to the tutorial and keep them focussed. If it seems like they need a break, tell them to take a short break and come back.
6. Remember to set and maintain boundaries. Some of our tutees are very sensitive about personal space. NEVER touch a tutee and allow the tutee to have as much personal space as he/she seems to need. Part of setting boundaries is to remind yourself that you are not the tutee’s counsellor, but that the school does have counselling services for those who need it.

7. Be sensitive! Remember to provide positive feedback and reinforcement. Some of our tutees have math or writing anxiety and are very sensitive about sharing their writing or math (dis)abilities with others. Try to find something positive to comment on, and provide constructive feedback on areas for improvement. If you are tutoring conversation, remember to steer conversations away from discussions that might prove upsetting or offensive. As the tutor, it is your role to monitor what others in the group are saying and to moderate as needed. Even very simple questions might cause discomfort with some of our tutees, so think before you ask.

8. Have meaningful, two-way communication with your tutee.

Listen to your tutee! Many of our tutees come to us for tutoring because they feel alone and isolated on campus/in Canada. Some of our tutees come for conversation tutoring because they lack the confidence to talk with their peers and have no other supports in Toronto. Listen for calls for help, and heed these calls as appropriate. If a tutee disclose that he/she is depressed or suicidal, take the tutee to counselling. If the tutee expresses thoughts that worry you, speak to the Advisor.

Watch what you say! Some of our tutees interpret speech literally, so avoid using metaphors and don’t be sarcastic. Use language that is clear and concrete, and provide instructions which are unambiguous. Be honest with your feedback, without being unduly harsh or critical. Some of our tutees have had traumatic life experiences, and certain topics can trigger painful emotions and reactions. Remember that the language we use needs to be sensitive and inclusive.

Remember that some of our tutees only understand part of what we say, so always check for comprehension, and rephrase as needed. Avoid overly idiomatic language and slang.

9. Collaborate with our college partners! Remember that the PAL Centre offers workshops that would benefit many of our tutees: Time Management, Stress Management, Acing Multiple Choice Tests etc. If you think the tutee would benefit from any of these, give him/her a flyer, or take him/her down to the PAL Centre. The library also has many resources available for our tutees; if necessary, show the tutee how to access and use them. Without asking a student to disclose, there are ways to mention services the student could benefit from. If your tutee says he/she can’t take notes, or can’t understand the instructor, you can mention that “some students are entitled to Peer Notetakers or Subject-specific tutors. You can ask in Room #.... for more information. Would you like me to take you there?”

10. Become familiar with resources available in the TLC and on campus. Practice using the UbiDuo and ZoomText. Look at a visual dictionary, listen to some of the audio resources available, and learn more about other supports at your campus. If you have any concerns about working with a specific tutee, speak to your Advisor, who can set up a meeting with Disability Services, or a Learning Strategist to determine the best course of action.