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## Case Spotlight: Definition of Disability

Case Name: [Hostettler v. College of Wooster](#)  
Citation: *Hostettler v. College of Wooster*, 895 F.3d 844 (6th Cir. 2018).  
Date of Decision: July 17, 2018  
Court: United States Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit  
Judge(s): Hon. Martha Daughtrey (author), Hon. Julia Gibbons, & Hon. Helene White  
Alleged Disability: Postpartum Depression & Separation Anxiety  
Prong(s) at issue: Actual

### Background:

In April, 2014, Heidi Hostettler (“Hostettler”) returned to work as an HR Generalist, after a 12-week maternity leave. *Hostettler*, 895 F.3d at 849. Hostettler began experiencing severe postpartum depression and separation anxiety before she returned to work. *Id.* According to her doctor, Hostettler “had one of the worst cases of separation anxiety” that he had seen and believed “it was medically necessary that [Hostettler] work a reduced schedule.” *Id.* The College of Wooster (“Wooster”) provided this accommodation. Nonetheless, Hostettler continued suffering from depression and anxiety. In fact, if she worked past noon, she suffered from panic attacks that caused difficulties breathing, thinking, and walking. *Id.* at 850. Wooster fired her in July when she was not able to return full time to her prior position. *Id.* at 851.

Hostettler sued, alleging, among other things, a violation of Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”), as amended by the ADA Amendments Act (“ADAAA”). The district court assumed that Hostettler had a disability under the ADA but granted summary judgment to Wooster on grounds that Hostettler was not “otherwise qualified for the job” because she could not perform its “essential functions.” *Id.* at 848. Hostettler appealed.

### Holding:

The Circuit Court reversed, holding, among other things, that Hostettler’s episodic attacks limited her ability to care for herself, sleep, walk, or speak, among other major life activities. *Id.* at 856.

## Analysis regarding “Actual Disability” (Prong 1):

The ADA defines “disability” as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” 42 U.S.C. § 12102(1)(A). Although the district court presumed that Hostettler satisfied this definition, the Circuit Court explicitly held that Hostettler “plainly is an individual with a disability.” *Hostettler*, 895 F.3d at 853-54. Rejecting Wooster’s argument that Hostettler did not have a disability because her panic attacks lasted only several minutes, the Circuit Court emphasized that, under the ADA, as amended by the ADAAA, “an impairment that is episodic or in remission is a disability if it would substantially limit a major life activity *when active*.” 42 U.S.C. § 12102(4)(D) (emphasis added). According to the Circuit Court, Hostettler’s depression and anxiety, when active, substantially limited her ability to care for herself, sleep, walk, or speak. *Hostettler*, 895 F.3d at 854.

The Circuit Court did not rely on the ADA’s mitigating measures provision. See 42 U.S.C. § 12102(4)(E). Nonetheless, that provision also strongly supported that Hostettler had a disability: absent prescription antidepressants, Hostettler’s depression and anxiety substantially limited her major life activities and “neurological [and] brain” functions. 42 U.S.C. § 12102(2)(B).

The Circuit Court’s decision is also noteworthy for its accurate description of courts’ overly narrow interpretation of the ADA’s definition of disability, which necessitated the ADAAA:

Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 to “assure equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency” for individuals with disabilities. 42 U.S.C. § 12101(a)(8) (pre-2008 amendments). To that end, the law broadly prohibits “discriminat[ion] against a qualified individual on the basis of disability” as it applies to aspects of employment including hiring, advancement, and firing. 42 U.S.C. § 12112(a).

But years of court decisions narrowly defining who qualifies as an individual with disabilities left the ADA too compromised to achieve its purpose. In response, Congress passed the [ADAAA] to invalidate those decisions and to “restore the intent and protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act.” Pub. L. No. 110–325, 122 Stat. 3553. In passing the ADAAA, Congress reasserted its goal of “provid[ing] clear, strong, consistent, enforceable standards” to implement a “comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.” 42 U.S.C. § 12101(b)(1), (2). It is against that background that this case must be viewed.

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Congress decided that the benefits of gainful employment for individuals with disabilities—dignity, financial independence, and self-sufficiency, among others—outweigh simple calculations of ease or efficiency.

*Hostettler*, 895 F.3d at 848-49, 857.