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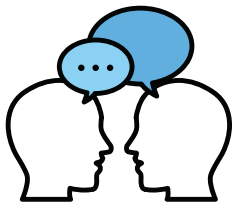


GRAND VALLEY  
STATE UNIVERSITY®

DEPARTMENT OF  
ANTHROPOLOGY

# COMMUNICATING STUDENT STRESS

BY: TAMARY HARRIS, ANTHONY SHANLEY, AARON STANKEWITZ



## Project Summary

During the 2023 winter semester, anthropology capstone students were divided into groups representing the four discipline subfields for the purpose of holistically approaching research regarding student stress and anxiety.

This booklet is a product of the students given the task of conducting research on the topic through linguistics; Tamary Harris, Anthony Shanley, and Aaron Stankewitz.

To reduce the communication barrier between students and faculty on the topic of stress and anxiety, these 3 completed interviews with 24 students at GVSU ranging from freshmen to first-year graduate students to understand their styles of communicating stress with special attention towards phrases of dark humor. The goal was to showcase the difference in linguistic tools that students utilize with the social contexts of friends and faculty.

## How do students communicate stress to their friends?

### **Explanatory Statements**

"I swear a lot and rant when talking about what's going on"

"There's not enough help after you graduate"

### **Dark Humor**

Self-destructive - "I'll jump in front of the Laker Line"

Outward-destructive - "I'm going to throw the torch around in my jewelry class"

### **Academic-avoiding**

"Can we have a day where we don't study or work?"

"I'm going to drop out and marry someone rich"

### **Suppression/Lack of Communication**

"I don't talk about my stress to anyone"

"I won't say much, just remove myself from the environment"

## Categorization of 41 Statements

Suppression/ Lack of Communication  
14.6%

Explanatory Statements  
31.7%

Academic-Avoiding  
17.1%



Dark Humor  
36.6%

# How do students communicate stress to their friends?

## Explanatory Statements

- "I'll explain, 'this is what's going on'"
- "Not gonna lie, I'm pissed"
- "I'm about to have a breakdown"
- "I'm gonna faint"
- "I'm kinda stressed out, I've got a lot on my plate"
- "I'm stressed with work, homework, tests"
- "I'm gonna cry"
- "This semester is kicking my ass"
- "My brain is fried"
- "School is killing me"
- "I'm overwhelmed"

## Dark Humor

- "I'll use occasional dark humor and jokes"
- "I'm gonna jump off a bridge"
- "I want to get hit by a bus"
- "I'll drive off a bridge"
- "I'll make a quick rant, say I want to jump off of something"
- "I want to run my car into a tree"
- "I'll throw my cat in the street"

## Dark Humor Continued

- "I want to run my car into a tree"
- "I'll throw my cat in the street"
- "I'm gonna kill myself"
- "I'm gonna drive my car off the road"
- "I might throw myself down the stairs"
- "I want to poke my eye out with a fork"
- "I'm going to join the homeless bridge people"

## Academic-avoiding

- "You wanna hang out today?"
- "Let's go get food or cook"
- "Let's go shopping"
- "I'm going to drop out"
- "I'm gonna start selling feet pics"

## Suppression/Lack of Communication

- "I'll just sigh a lot"
- "If I was asked how I was doing, I'd just give them *the look*"
- "I'd say a lot of 'fuck you's', but keep to myself"
- "I don't get stressed much, so I don't tell my friends"

## How do students communicate stress with faculty?

### **No Communication of Stress**

- "I wouldn't talk about stress with a professor"
- 6 of our 24 respondents said they would not mention stress in communication with faculty

### **Communication Without Indicating Stress**

- "I'd frame it as a 'me issue' and dampen how stressful it is"
- "I would be more formal and less specific, like, 'I need an extension, due to a bad week'"
- "I downplay my stress level"

### **Communication with Simple Description of Stress**

- "Email my professors, 'Hey I have a lot on my plate . . . I'm sure you've noticed I'm not performing as well . . . I might take a day off.'"
- "I would be more straightforward, describe specific concerns"
- "I'm a little stressed out, sorry if I'm slow"
- "I'm stressed over this . . . do you have any advice?"
- "I would say something like, 'it's affecting me mentally'"
- "I would let them know I'm overwhelmed and need some time"

### **Style of Communicating Stress with Faculty**

- "If I were to talk with a professor I would need to know them more"
- "I would speak more formal, not use dark humor"
- "I won't use dark humor ... I need to be close with the professor"

## Recommendations

Most students described that they would restrict their emotional language use with their instructors and refrain from using dark humor phrases they might use in contexts of their friends. Students who said they would share their emotional states with faculty explained that a close relationship with the professor was a requirement to share how they were truly feeling. To reduce this communication barrier, we recommend that:

- professors ask students about their stress levels periodically
- professors meaningfully build rapport with students to ease the strain for students to communicate their stress and anxiety
- professors facilitate community-building between students through classroom activities or "icebreakers"