

Minds that Matter: Anxiety

The Healthy Minds Study (U. Michigan--2017) surveyed 54 schools with 50,000 students (300 schools, 300,000 student). According to the Healthy Minds Surveys, 39% of students are experiencing a major mental health issue, with many dealing with more than one problem. The survey showed rising rates of suicidal ideation among students 6% (2007) to 14% (2019). Only about 1/3 of students with a diagnosable mental health problem receive treatment. Asian students and Students of Color were least likely to get treatment.

How Common is Anxiety in Students? 10% have severe Anxiety (versus 18% with Depression). Panic Disorder (a type of Anxiety disorder) is common. Women are twice as likely as men to experience both anxiety, in general, and Panic Disorder. People with Anxiety are also at high risk for Depression (50% of those with Anxiety will have depression at some time during their life), and the combination of Anxiety and Depression is associated with particularly dramatic reductions in GPA.

Outcomes for Students: Students with mental health issues tend to have lower GPAs and an increased tendency to drop out (the drop-out rate is doubled).

What is Anxiety: Anxiety involves a high-level of arousal and alertness to danger. While the focus of the anxiety may vary from person to person, discomfort in new situations, fear of failure, and fear of negative evaluation are common. The fear is out of proportion to the actual risk, but even when the person knows this logically, the fear can be overwhelming and lead them to avoid the feared situations, events, people or places in order to reduce the threat. Extreme, acute episodes of anxiety may appear in the form of Panic Attacks.

What Are Key Signs of Anxiety?

- Excessive worry or apprehension (often there a “worst case scenario” focus)
- Difficulty controlling or “turning off” the worry
- The worry is intrusive and distressing
- Other common symptoms: feeling restlessness or keyed-up, problems concentrating, memory issues, irritability, muscle tension and aches, problems sleeping, fatigue, nausea/stomach discomfort or GI distress.

What Are Key Signs of a Panic Attack?

- Starts abruptly and often unexpectedly
- Symptoms peak within a few minutes and are gone within 15-20 minutes or less
- palpitations, sweating, shaking/trembling, shortness of breath or feeling of smothering, feeling of choking, chest pain, nausea, dizziness/lightheadedness, chill, numbness or tingling, sense of “going crazy” or fear of dying.
- Many middle-aged people who experience this for the first time believe they are having a heart attack
- May be associated with Agoraphobia, where people begin to avoid certain settings (e.g. the classroom) due to fear/anxiety (or fear of having a panic attack there).

Are there other types of Anxiety? YES, and each is a little different.

- **Social Anxiety** involves intense fear of being evaluated negatively by others. This can lead to discomfort in new situations, reluctance to engage socially, and intense fear of performance-like situations (e.g., testing, public speaking) with problematic anxiety (including possible panic

attacks) when forced to engage in these activities. This types of anxiety is very common (8%) in the general population.

- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** occurs in about 20% of people who experience trauma. Involves intrusive memories of the events, nightmares, feeling keyed up or on edge, irritability, difficulties sleeping and concentrating, hyper-vigilance, emotional detachment, avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and anxiety when confronted with stimuli associated with the trauma.

What Else Do We Know? Some individuals show general signs of anxiety starting from a very young age, but for many, anxiety becomes a problem around the time of puberty or later, into the early 20's. Once it appears, anxiety tends to be chronic, but it tends to increase when the person is under more stress and it may decrease when they are under less stress.

How might Anxiety Appear in the Classroom?

- Not speaking up in class or participating in discussions
- Difficulty responding when called on in class (due to performance anxiety)
- Avoidance of group interactions, limited participation in groups
- Social withdrawal
- Avoidance of situations that are new or that present a risk for failure
- Unwillingness to approach the professor in class or office hours/make eye contact
- Agitation, restlessness in the classroom
- Tears/panicked reactions when given assignments such as oral presentations or when faced with a challenging assignment or a low grade
- Difficulty with concentration/memory on exams—worsened with time pressure
- Fatigue/sleepiness in the classroom (due to not sleeping)

Possible Course Design Issues

- Provide an organized syllabus and descriptions of assignments with key dates (confusion, miscommunication, lack of clarity increases anxiety)
- Allow some dropped and/or late exams or assignments
- Provide a series of small assignments with feedback so student can learn what you expect
- Avoid single, heavily weighted assignments
- Consider breaking large assignments into smaller steps to make them less overwhelming
- Provide alternatives to presentations and discussions (journaling?)
- Do not heavily weight attendance
- Allow missed exams when necessary
- Allow alternate testing to reduce time pressure or distraction
- Include a well-being statement in syllabus and try to appear welcoming, approachable and flexible