Anxiety in College Students and How We Prevent It

Laura Boyett

Longwood University

*“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.”*

Anxiety in College Students and How We Prevent It

College students around the world are being faced with a rapidly increasing epidemic that is inhibiting their abilities to perform well in class and on tests. These students are struggling to make good grades, despite the fact that they are intelligent people. They are fighting the battle with a common mental illness known as anxiety. Anxiety in its own covers many different subcategories such as social anxiety, sexual anxiety, and generalized anxiety. These college students are faced with challenges that other students do not and are rarely accommodated for it. Anxiety is more than just stress, it controls a person’s every thought and action and in extreme cases is debilitating to the point of not getting out of bed. Colleges and Universities are not taking the correct measure to help their students to succeed with a disability that is often not recognized as such. Situations like these are leading to higher dropout rates, student’s insecurity, lower test performance, and reliance on substances such as drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms. The system needs to change and the only way for that to happen is to raise awareness for this pressing issue that affects college age students across the country.

# Identifying the Issues

Diagnosing a student with anxiety is not as easy as it seems, often students have to jump through hoops in order to receive a proper diagnosis. According to the article written by Katie Reilly (2018), many college and universities that offer free counseling, only offer limited help where wait times and lists are extensive. Backups are common and often times the counselors that are available don’t have openings for weeks or even months. For students that suffer from anxiety disorders this is a contributing factor to the already existing anxieties and does absolutely nothing to help alleviate the current stressors. More often than not, these already limited options are even more limited by short hours and lack of available counselors. With anxiety levels across

America increasing every year, these educational institutions are not doing anything to help those already diagnosed with anxiety.

Students without a clinical diagnosis but need one are turned away for the simple reason that they are stressed and need to find ways to de-stress. Stress is a common issue that effects every single college student in America, however stress is vastly different than anxiety. Anxiety is a mental illness that effects a person mentally and physically, and effects day to day activities. When this illness is not taken seriously it can have negative effects for the students who are actually suffering. This also creates a stigma around anxiety and other mental illnesses, which leads to students being hesitant to seek out the help that they need. Educating students and educators on the signs and symptoms of different anxiety disorders helps erase the stigma and allows for those affected by anxiety to have trusted allies to help them cope with their mental illness.

**Recognizing the Signs**

According to the article written by Fernández-Castilla (2015), one of the most common signs of an anxiety disorder is how well students perform on tests and exams. When students do well in class discussion, on classwork, they participate in class, but perform poorly on exams and tests this can be a sign of anxiety. Test anxiety is a symptom of generalized anxiety and is common among college age students. For many students, tests can be the deciding factor between an A and a B in their class which affects their GPA and in turn can also affect scholarships and the ability to stay enrolled in school. Students with anxiety see not being able to stay in school as the worst possible outcome and focus on that one factor. This thought controls them and distracts them from studying, and students with social anxiety are uncomfortable asking for help. This leads to the poor performance on their tests because all of their time and

energy is spent focused on the worst possible outcome, especially if it is irrational.

Another common symptom of anxiety is alcohol abuse. Alcohol is a depressant and often slows our inhibitions. For many individuals with anxiety, this is a coping mechanism to deal with the never-ending thoughts racing through their mind. The study done by São Paulo (2018) showed that there is a correlation between anxiety and alcoholism in college age students. Students were given an intervention and after the intervention students were less likely to abuse alcohol, however anxiety levels remained the same. This shows that anxiety is not something that a person affected by it can control, even after they are aware of the problem. Alcoholism is a serious issue; however, anxiety is as well, and they are not treated to the same caliber.

Depression, self-harm, and other mental illnesses often go hand in hand with anxiety disorders. Those who self-harm are more likely to have anxiety about hiding scars, who they should tell, if they should seek help, among many other things. These factors lead to very stressful lives, especially if the person is a college student. The average stress of a college student dealing with depression and anxiety leads to poor performance and social issues. Depressing thoughts are encouraged by anxiety disorders and then they are obsessed over until they become almost unbearable. Social anxiety gives those affected a lack of the skills needed to communicate with others efficiently and when a person suffers from social anxiety and the effects of depression it causes them to have a harder time trying to find help. According to the Pakistan Medical Journal (2018), the number of males is equal to the number of females who self-harm, however female college students are more likely to be affected by depression and anxiety. The warning signs are often more difficult than not to recognize. Students that have both depression and anxiety are more at risk for dropping out and failing than those who are unaffected.

The symptoms of anxiety are difficult to identify to individuals who are not affected by it. Students that suffer from generalized anxiety often focus on irrational fears and act in ways to prevent them. For example, a student that is afraid of elevator would take the stairs every day in a building that had ten stories or a student that had an irrational fear of getting sick might spray disinfectant more often than others. Generalized anxiety causes worry in every single day to day interaction. Being afraid toothpaste has gone bad, excessively worrying about what people will think of an outfit, the fear of a coffee mug not being clean enough, worrying about having the correct books for class, and overthinking a wave to a friend who didn’t notice are all warning signs for generalized anxiety. This type of anxiety is about simple tasks that most people wouldn’t think twice about. Social anxiety is slightly different whereas those affected are afraid of social interaction and having it go poorly. They could be afraid to ask a question in class, correct a wrong food order, walk up to a person in public, or even talk on the phone. This affects how they are able to communicate their thoughts and feeling with others which can often lead to a feeling of seclusion. Social anxiety is harmful to how college students are able to perform in class. They are unable to get the help that they might need in order to succeed because of the fear that they have of certain social interactions.

Sexual anxiety differs from generalized anxiety and social anxiety, however is still categorized under anxiety. College students that suffer from sexual anxiety are struggling with sexual beliefs, morals, and sexual identities. The LGBTQ community is rising in today’s modern society and many students are struggling with their sexual identities. Colleges and Universities are frequently a place where sexual identities can be explored, however there are still anxieties involved. Students struggling with their identity can have anxiety about telling their friends, meeting people to have a relationship with, and even being able to maintain relationships with

Others. College age is a time where students are exploring themselves sexually and pressure from their peers can cause moral anxieties. Anxiety arises from situations individuals are uncomfortable with. If a student grew up in a house where sex was frowned upon until marriage and they arrive at college and are put in a sexual situation, this might cause some anxieties. The student might question their own morals, or even give into peer pressure because they are afraid to say no. There are many issues that can arise when a person has sexual anxiety. These students affected might be afraid to start new relationships for the fear of being put in an uncomfortable situation. This may cause sexual suppression and cause serious damages in the long run. This may also cause unsecure attachment. If a person is suffering from sexual anxiety they may bond with another person that shows them affection and become attached to them in an extremely unhealthy way according to The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality (2018). Sexual anxiety is an issue that often goes unaddressed at colleges and universities because students are often discouraged from having sexual relations at all. This leads to the increase in anxiety across America.

**What Needs to Be Done**

Across America college students are suffering with little to no assistance because of anxiety disorders. Better treatments options need to become readily available for all students. The wait time for an appointment needs to be fixed by hiring more counselors and professionals for students to use as a resource. Mental health is important to succeeding in school and at life. College already is home to numerous stressors such as finals, exams, living on their own for the first time, living with someone they’ve never met in a small dorm room, regular assignments, papers, and extracurricular activities. Dealing with anxiety on top of all of these factors can be considered torture for those who suffer. Doing nothing to eliminate the stigma surrounding

anxiety and other mental illnesses will only increase the likelihood that they will go undiagnosed which only increases the epidemic. Colleges and Universities need to implement strategies to help the students that are struggling with their day to day lives. These strategies might include seminars, more opportunities to reach out to help, and even offering an anonymous hotline. There are ways to help those in need that are simply not being done and that needs to change.

**Conclusion**

Anxiety has many different names and affects many different faces. Focusing on college age students that attend universities and other educational institutions, anxiety is the number one problem faced. Students that suffer from anxiety are more likely to perform poorly and drop out, giving the schools they attend a poor retention rate. Anxiety affects many students in a unique way, each case is often different in specifics. Many are affected daily in small tasks that would normally appear to be simple, however to those that suffer from anxiety these tasks can seem big and impossible. Generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and sexual anxiety are more prevalent on. College campuses today that at any other time in history. This is an issue that is failed to be addressed. Colleges have become a place where students that suffer from anxiety are not receiving the help that they need. Appointments with a trained professional are extremely hard to come across and students are often misdiagnosed. These issues are not impossible to solve, and the solutions are not being taken advantage of. Students across the country are silently suffering from mental illness and the stigma surrounding it is preventing them from seeking help. They are afraid of being judged and ridiculed for the fact that they are mentally ill. These students that have social anxiety are especially deterred from ever getting the help that they need. Graduating college is one of the biggest focuses for college students, however with anxiety students are focusing on things they can’t control, and this hinders their abilities to succeed. Overall, anxiety

in college age students is a rapidly increasing issue that affects these students in their everyday lives and without help from their educational institutions the growing epidemic will continue to grow and more and more students will suffer in silence

References

Cavanagh, Anna, Caputi, Peter, Wilson, Coralie J, Kavanagh, David. (2016). Gender differences in self-reported depression and co-occurring anxiety and stress in a vulnerable community population. *Australian Psychologist,* 61(6)

Cheng, Shu Hui, Sun, Zih-Jie, I Hui, Lee, Chih-Ting, Chen, Kao, Chin, Tsai, Chung Hung, Yang, Yen Kuang, Yang, Yi Ching. (2017). Factors related to self-reported social anxiety symptoms among incoming university students. *Early Intervention in Psychology,* 11(4)

Dang, Silvan S., Northey, Lynnaea, Dunkley, Cara R., Rigby, Richard R., Gorzalka, Boris B. (2018). Sexual identity and sexual beliefs as mediators of the association between attachment orientation with sexual functioning and distress in university men and women. *Journal in Human Sexuality,* 27(1)

Fernández-Castillo, Antonio, Caurcel, María J. (2015) State-test anxiety, selective attention and concentration in university students. *International Journal of Psychology*, 50(4)

Raza, Asad, Abbasi, UI Hasan, Khurshid, Maryam, Ansari, Muhammad Ibrahim. (2018). The relationship between depression, anxiety, stress, and self harm among college students: a cross sectional survey. *Pakistan Armed Forces Medical Journal,* 68(1)

São Paulo, SP. (2018). Revista psicologia: teoria e práctica. 20(2), 107-119