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# Anxiety and the Undergraduate:

## Common Difficulties Due to Anxiety and How Post-Secondary Educators Can Help

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## Facts about Anxiety Disorders

- Anxiety is one of the most prevalent psychological disorders
- Begins at young ages
- High co-occurrance of anxiety disorders, and with depression
- Persistent when untreated
- Risk for negative long-term consequences when untreated

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## Consequences of Anxiety

- Personal: low self-concept, feelings of helplessness, somatic complaints, delayed progress in meeting developmental tasks
- Academic: concentration and attention difficulties, falling behind in school, difficulty participating in class
- Social: difficulty initiating or sustaining friendships, becoming overly invested in one friendship or intimate relationship
- Familial: increased family stress, fighting, struggles

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## Why is it difficult to identify anxiety?

- Anxiety is a typical emotion and a part of life
- Students often do not know that what they're experiencing is beyond typical "stress"
- They may have felt this way for their whole lives, and their families may not have viewed this anxiety as serious

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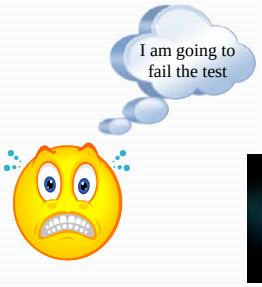
## The Nature of Anxiety Disorders

- Three components
  - Behavioral
  - Cognitive
  - Physiological



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## Anxiety and the College Setting

- Many Aspects of the Academic Setting May Induce Anxiety
- Separation from Family
- Social Interaction
- Social Evaluation
- Performance Evaluation
- Threats to Self-esteem

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## Anxiety Disorders in Young Adults

- Panic Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Social Anxiety Disorder (Social phobia)
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder

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## Panic Disorder

- Experience of unexpected panic attack (a false alarm)
  - Symptoms- e.g. heart racing, difficulty breathing, dizziness, sweating, trembling, fear of loosing control or "going crazy"
- Develop anxiety, worry, or fear about having another attack or its implications
- Symptoms and concern about another attack persists for one month or more
- Can sometimes lead to Agoraphobia – a fear or avoidance of situations/events associated with panic

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## Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

- Obsessions are recurrent, intrusive, uncontrollable thoughts, images, or urges that result in anxiety and discomfort
  - Typically these thoughts, images, and urges are resisted
- Compulsions are behaviors that are performed to suppress the obsessions and reduce the anxiety and discomfort, providing relief
- Some common types of compulsions:
  - Cleaning or Washing
  - Checking rituals
  - Repeating a phrase a specific number of times

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## Social Anxiety Disorder (Social phobia)

- Fear of public humiliation, negative evaluation, or embarrassment
- Intense fear of social and performance situations
- Fear embarrassing themselves or be negatively evaluated
- Fears situations such as:
  - unstructured interactions with peers
  - initiating conversations
  - performing in front of others
  - inviting others to get together
  - Eating in front of others

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## Social Anxiety Disorder (Social phobia)

- Minimal interaction and conversation with peers
- Appears isolated and on the fringes of the group
- May sit alone in the library or cafeteria, hang back,
- Excessive shyness
- Difficulty with public speaking, reading aloud, being called on in class, gym class – may impair grades
- Anticipation of a social event may provoke a panic attack

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## Generalized Anxiety Disorder

- Excessive and uncontrollable worry about school, grades, performance, future, family, health, finances
- "What if" concerns that span far into the future
- Physical symptoms: headaches, stomachaches, inability to unwind/relax
- Difficulty concentrating, always thinking what's next
- Low risk-taking; Need for reassurance and approval for small steps

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## G.A.D. - More Worries

- Perfectionism, fear of making mistakes, unrealistic, unfavorable assessment of their grades, abilities
- Over-responsibility: if disaster happens that it's their fault
- Negative news that happens to others, fears will happen to them; everything is *contagious by association:* divorce, illness, car accidents, food poisoning
- Sleep difficulties, irritability, fatigue

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## Tips for Instructors/Professors

Keep an eye out for anxiety symptoms

- Subtle reinforcement for socially anxious students
- Praise for effort rather than perfection
- Encourage seeking you out during office hours
- Make adjustments to performance related assignments instead of eliminating the assignment
- Give extra structure ahead of time for unstructured class discussions

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## Instructors and Parents: Reinforce and don't rescue

- Encourage student to solve his or her problems.
- Help them to come up with solutions and evaluate option.
- Gives them a vote of confidence (and competence)
- Be flexible
- Know when to suggest to a student that they can get help with their anxieties.

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## For Parents

Help them interact with new adults and in new situations

- Making their own doctor, dentist, hair, (anything) appointments
- Ordering for themselves or everyone at a restaurant
- Returning items to a store
- Trying on items at the jewelry counter and not making a purchase
- Encouraging teen to meet with a difficult teacher

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## When to refer?

When the anxiety…

- Seems excessive for the situation or compared to peers
- Interferes with ability to function or with quality of life
- Is burdensome and bothersome to the student
- Is consistent over a period of time

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## Treatments for Anxiety

- Therapies
  - Cognitive Behavioral therapy
  - Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
  - Interpersonal Psychotherapy
- Medication
  - SSRIs, SNRIs (Prozac, Paxil, Lexapro, Cymbalta, etc.)
  - Benzodiazapines (Klonopin, Xanax, Valium, etc.)

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# Resources

Websites - Sources for referral and literature

- Anxiety Disorders Association of America http://www.adaa.org
- Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies - http://www.abct.org
- Association for Contextual Behavior Therapy http://contextualpsychology.org

Services

- Your institution's student health or counseling center!
- Fairleigh Dickenson University Center for Psychological Services, Hackensack main line: (201) 692-2645, http://view.fdu.edu/default.aspx?id=339
- Rutgers Anxiety Disorders Clinic, Piscataway, NJ, (732) 445-2181, http://anxietyclinic.rutgers.edu/index.html
- Julie L. Ryan, Ph.D., 156 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10010, (646) 543-7492