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ALLEVIATING STUDENT ANXIETY

A Compendium of Best Practices and Recommendations

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an umbrella term referring to an emotion often precipitating feelings of worry, trepidation, fear, tension, overthinking, and/or general uneasiness.[1] It can manifest in many forms and can influence one mentally, physically, and physiologically.

How Does Anxiety Manifest Itself?

Every individual's experience of anxiety will be different as some experience it lightly and transiently, while others experience it more chronically and intensely. Micro and macro dynamics can also help or hinder these experiences further. For instance, cultural and socioeconomic factors can mean that anxiety is experienced and responded to differently for various students. Indigenous peoples[2] and people of color[3], for example, can often experience heightened levels of anxiety. Moreover, these factors can also influence the support and resources that students both pursue and receive[4][5]. As such, it is always important to be cognizant of contextual elements when considering student anxiety. In any case, anxiety can fundamentally affect a person's day to day functioning, and can significantly impact the many moving parts of one's life such as their career, family life, social life, and academic studies.

Why is Focusing on Anxiety Important when Considering Student Learning?

It is critical to address anxiety when considering student learning as its onset can incite significant challenges with concentration, comprehension, cognition, motivation, mental/physical energy, memory, feelings of self-efficacy, and sentiments of inadequacy which can substantially influence one's learning and overall academic experiences. Providing support for alleviating a student's anxiety can subsequently help to improve both their well-being and academic potential. Below is a list of suggestions for mitigating student anxiety which includes strategies faculty can employ and techniques for students to practice.

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Guiding questions to consider:

- What course content is necessary to achieve the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for the course? Students can often feel overwhelmed when navigating a long list of course content and requirements. Consider what is necessary versus what might be a 'nice to have' in your course content. ☐

- What kind of course assessments will help students effectively demonstrate their learning while also offering some flexibility in how and when students will complete these course requirements? ☐

- What can I do to best to support myself while also supporting students? What boundaries will and can I set to take care of myself while juggling my own competing priorities? ☐

Recommended practices to help alleviate student anxiety:

- **Communicate with your students regularly.** This can be done through weekly announcements/emails to students. Try to establish a system that works best for you. For example, this might mean posting a weekly announcement on your learning management system (LMS) outlining what students need to complete for the week, a reminder about any upcoming tests or assignment due dates, and any other information you deem relevant for your course. ☐

- **Be flexible.** Consider creating diverse opportunities for students to complete coursework. This might include: giving students options on how to complete an assignment (for example, giving students a choice between submitting a written piece of work or a recorded audio-visual presentation); allowing students to drop lower course grades; giving students the option of submitting work for extra credit or bonus marks; and establishing a grace period around deadlines (for example, giving students a 48 hour grace period to submit an assignment after the deadline without penalty) ☐

- **Facilitate Social Interactions:** Social connectedness is associated with improved cognition and self-esteem, and a reduction in anxiety, loneliness, and stress[7]. When possible, facilitate these amongst your students or invite them to do so on their own. This could mean creating prompts and opportunities at in class for students to connect with one another; inviting students to find a 'course buddy'; encouraging them to create a Facebook group, WhatsApp group, or helping them to schedule time to make connections outside of the classroom (e.g. organizing a student social event at the university). Specifically in an online learning environment, students might feel isolated and disconnected from their peers, and from you, the instructor. Consider creating a discussion forum where students can post content about themselves. This can help open up lines of communication between students and between you and the students. ☐

- **Ask how to help.** It is also important to note that although creating and maintaining social connections can alleviate experiences with anxiety, the actual ☐

BEST PRACTICES FOR ALLEVIATING STUDENT ANXIETY[6]

process of establishing social connectedness may also be anxiety-provoking, especially for students who experience social anxiety. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach to forming connections will not be ideal. Get to know your students and ask them for direct suggestions on how you can best facilitate healthy and positive connections amongst them.

- **Be Vulnerable.** Consider, as much as you are comfortable doing so, sharing information about your personal life and some challenges that you go through. This can help students by showing them that they are not alone in the struggles that they may be experiencing. Consider also incorporating opportunities for mindfulness, stress management, self-compassion, and gratitude into your course as these can substantially help to alleviate anxiety. Mindfulness can aid with cognition, memory, attention, and concentration[8], while gratitude can improve subjective well-being, self-esteem[9] and has also been found to help students feel more engaged and attentive with improved focus, motivation, and resilience[10]. Practicing self-compassion has been shown to improve general well-being and minimize anxiety, depression, overthinking, burnout, perfectionism, self-rumination and fear of failure[11]. With respect to learning, self-compassion increases self-efficacy in academic performance[12], positively influences learning-based achievement goal orientations while minimizing performance-based achievement goals, peer comparisons, and feelings of failure, guilt, and negative self-judgements[13]. Making time to practice these in the classroom can help students feel more connected to each other and to you, and can lead to a safer and more comfortable learning environment. Here are some techniques you may want to implement:

    Mindfulness and gratitude: A simple way to embed mindfulness and gratitude into your teaching might be to invite students to mindfully reflect on a focus of their choice at the beginning of each class; you can model this by participating too. This can be done collectively as a class or as an independent reflection. Prompt them to consider what can be seen, heard, and/or felt, and emphasize noticing these things in positive and grateful ways. Invite them to focus less on the past and future, and primarily on the present moment. Emphasize what you are grateful for and encourage your students to do this also. Practicing this each week can set a positive tone for the class and provide students with the time and space to do this in a safe environment.

    Self-compassion: Make some time in your class to practice self-compassion together. Encourage your students to replace thoughts of self-judgement with self-kindness, emphasize shared experiences over individualization, and highlight acceptance over resistance. You may choose to create an anonymous self-compassion 'box' where willing students anonymously note a self-compassion item they are working on and leave them in the box to be shared with the class, building a sense of community and connection.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS AND FACULTY

York offers a number of valuable resources that can assist you in supporting your students while also taking care of yourself. A curated list is shared below to help you get started.

Mental Health and Wellness at York - Resources for Students
This curated list of resources offers a number of services available to York students.

Here is the link to mental health resources at York

There are also resources available for Faculty and Staff

Here is the link to mental health resources at York for Faculty

Here is the link to mental health resources at York for Staff

Student Counselling, Health & Well-Being
Students can access a variety of counselling and mental health services through this office. Their website also includes information about same day, just in time support.

Here is the link to learn more

Graduate Student Health and Wellness Services
Graduate Student Wellness Services supports the mental health and wellbeing of graduate students at York. Their website lists a variety of services and resources that may be helpful for your graduate students, including webinars, workshops, and a resource hub.

Here is the link to learn more

Report: COVID-19 Impacts on Student Learning and Equity
The Centre for Human Rights, Equity, and Inclusion (CHREI) produced a fulsome report on the challenges and inequitable impact our students faced, and continue to face, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report highlights many potential areas that may cause anxiety for our students alongside important resources and supports.

Here is the link to the report

Here is the link to learn more about the Centre for Human Rights, Equity, and Inclusion

Student Guide to Remote Learning
Our colleagues in Student Community and Leadership Development (SCLD) created a robust guide for students covering many aspects of learning remotely that may cause anxiety. Topics include tips for studying remotely, working in groups online, and giving online presentations.

Here is the link to information about Adapting to Remote Learning

Here is the link to the Student Guide to Remote Learning

Teaching Commons
Your liaison Educational Developer can assist you in exploring how to integrate the best practices listed in this resource into your course(s). You can email your liaison developer to set up a time to meet.

Here is the link to find contact information for your liaison educational developer

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS AND FACULTY

Student Accessibility Services

Students with disabilities may experience unique challenges related to anxiety. Student Accessibility Services (SAS) can help these students access important supports while also providing resources to you for how you can support all of your students' unique needs.

Here is the link to more information for students

Here is the link to more information for faculty

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[1] Please refer to https://www.apa.org/topics/anxiety

[2] Please refer to https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00035-eng.htm

[3] Please refer to https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/06/study-shows-impostor-syndromes-effect-minority-students-mental-health

[4] Please refer to https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6099776/

[5] Please refer to https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2016-10/case_for_diversity_oct_2016_eng.pdf

[6] The following questions and recommended practices are derived primarily from the following sources: Mays Imad, "Hope Matters", *Inside Higher Education,* available at: https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/03/17/10-strategies-support-students-and-help-them-learn-during-coronavirus-crisis; and Lynne Kennette & Julie Daigle, "Tips for Reducing Stress", *Faculty Focus,* available at: https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/educational-assessment/tips-for-reducing-student-stress/.

[7] Williams, K. L., & Galliher, R. V. (2006). Predicting depression and self–esteem from social connectedness, support, and competence. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *25*(8), 855-874.

[8] Shapiro et al. (2016). Mindfulness, mental health, and positive psychology. In I. Ivtzan, & T. Lomas (Eds.), *Mindfulness in positive psychology: The science of meditation and well-being* (pp. 108-125). Routledge.

[9] Alkozei et al. (2018). Gratitude and subjective well being: A proposal of two causal frameworks. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 19*(5), 1519-1542.

[10] Wilson, J.T. (2016). Brightening the mind: The impact of practicing gratitude on focus and resilience in learning. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 16*(4), 1-13.

[11] Neff, K. D., & Vonk, R. (2009). Self-compassion versus global self-esteem: Two different ways of relating to oneself. *Journal of personality*, *77*(1), 23-50.

[12] Manavipour, D., & Saeedian, Y. (2016). The role of self-compassion and control belief about learning in university students' self-efficacy. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, *5*(2), 121-126.

[13] Akın, A. (2008). Self-compassion and achievement goals: A structural equation modeling approach. *Egitim Arastirmalari-Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 31, 1-15.

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