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### The impact of anxiety on college students' academic lives

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## **The Impact of Anxiety on College Students' Academic Lives**

### **Abstract**

Anxiety appears to be a problem facing many college students. The literature on anxiety in college students is expansive, but there is very little research on how students are able to balance their anxiety with academics. The researches in this study conducted semi-structured interviews with five students, four males and one female, at James Madison University on how their anxiety impacts their academics and what they do to succeed. The students came from a limited sample size but were varied in their mental health diagnoses. The results of the study showed many different techniques that students used to combat anxiety. The most common tactics involved talking or hanging out with their friends and roommates, running or other forms of exercising, and techniques that resembled cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). These activities and other distractions mentioned are cited by students as being helpful and could be used to help other students with anxiety in the future.

## Introduction

Anxiety has been defined as “multiple mental and physiological phenomena, including a person's conscious state of worry over a future unwanted event, or fear of an actual situation” (Evans, 2005, p. 162). Anxiety is prevalent among college students. In a survey of almost 400 college campuses across America, 46.2% of students cited anxiety as their highest concern (Reetz, Barr & Krylowicz, 2013). In another sample of 374 students at Franciscan University, Beiter et al. (2015) found that 11% of students reported symptoms of severe or extremely severe stress levels, 15% reported severe/extremely severe anxiety, and 11% reported severe/extremely severe depression. These rates suggest a problem that could interfere with academics for many undergraduates. If strategies are discovered that can best help students balance academics with their anxiety, then university students and staff could benefit. There are several different subclassifications of anxiety, the most relevant in college populations that include social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and panic disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These three anxiety disorders could impact students’ academic lives by interfering with their studies. Social anxiety is defined as “extreme worry over ridicule, humiliation, or embarrassment in a social situation that is not the result of a serious cognitive or physical impairment in the ability to interact with others.” (Evans, 2005, p. 171). Social anxiety is prevalent among undergraduates and can affect students’ academics since there is such a social component involved in universities nationwide (Beiter et. Al, 2015). GAD is defined as people “who worry about a variety of events or life circumstances.” GAD could impact academics by causing excessive worry that may interfere with studying or completing work. Panic disorder is defined as “the repeated experience of intense fear of impending doom or danger following the unprovoked experience of bodily symptoms, especially rapid heart rate, shortness of breath,

choking sensations, and sweating, or a feeling of depersonalization.” (Evans, 2005, pp. 170-172).

If panic attacks were to occur while in a classroom setting, this could disrupt the learning environment for not only the student with panic disorder but also those around them. Other anxiety disorders that may be relevant are specific phobias, separation anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Evans, 2005, pp. 170-172).

### **Causes of Anxiety**

One reason for undergraduates having such a high occurrence of anxiety is the adjustment to college. The changes that result from this transition are difficult for many students (Finkelstein-Fox, Park, & Riley, 2018), and one of the effects of the transition may be increased anxiety, over and above the levels of anxiety students had in high school. Although difficulties in adjustment are normal for college students, it can cause much stress in their daily lives (Mize & Kliewer, 2017). Suldo and Shaunessy-Dedrick (2013) found that transitioning to a new school and curriculum can cause many problems. They found that students in a typical curriculum struggled in their first year at a new school, reporting higher levels of stress and anxiety as well as lower grades and life satisfaction. Upon entering college, most students are met with harder classes, more homework, and more freedom/independence than they have had for most of their lives. The increase of availability of alcohol and drugs, as well as the unfamiliar environment lead to increased stressors. These challenges are part of what makes the transition to college difficult. But for most undergraduate students, their stress levels are high throughout college since even after proper adjustment they start to worry about their lives in the “real world” after graduation (Finkelstein-Fox, Park, & Riley, 2018). This contradicts the claim that the adjustment to the initial transition is the biggest stressor for students, as Finkelstein-Fox, Park, & Riley (2018) found that anxiety about future careers was a top stressor among college students,

particularly juniors and seniors. It stands to reason that once the adjustment period is over it is no longer a source of anxiety. What happens after college, whether it be getting a job or apply to graduate schools, tends to weigh heavily on the mind of older college students. Even after the stress of adjustment is over, there are still situations that can create anxiety in students.

In addition to the transition to college, several other factors have been found to predict anxiety. Boumosleh and Jaalouk (2017) found a positive correlation between smartphone use and anxiety levels among college students. In particular, social anxiety was found to be correlated with smartphone addiction, though it is unclear if the anxiety causes the addiction or if the addiction causes the anxiety. Over 40% of students at a university in the US acknowledged being fully or almost fully addicted to their smartphones. A sample of 688 undergraduate students were surveyed, and more than one-fifth of the sample reported indications of functional impairment as a result of smartphone use (Boumosleh & Jaalouk, 2017). Higher levels of smartphone addiction were found to be correlated with higher depression and anxiety scores. In addition, people with type A personality were found to have a higher incidence of smartphone addiction (Boumosleh & Jaalouk, 2017). This may be due to the finding that type A individuals, particularly women, experience stress in unhealthy ways and are prone to anxiety, due to their higher likelihood being obsessive with their work. Smartphone use may be used as a way to cope with stress, used as a way to escape reality, but this may also lead to a lack of connection with the real world (Boumosleh & Jaalouk, 2017).

Recently teenage usage of the internet has become dramatically increased. People with social anxiety are likely to use social media and the internet as a way to hide and communicate with people without actually having to see or talk to them in person (Molvavi, Mikaeli, Ghaseminejad, Kazemi, & Pourdonya, 2018). This could be connected with Boumosleh and

Jaalouk's (2017) finding of a correlation between smartphone use and anxiety. Potentially people hide in their phones to avoid talking to others in person. One problem with the use of social media as a communicator is the possibility of rumination, which is lengthy bouts of thinking about a problem. People with social anxiety online were found to be more likely to ruminate (Dempsey, O'Brien, Tiamiyu, & Elhai, 2019), which several authors believe is caused by self-disclosure on social media and the internet (Molvavi, Mikaeli, Ghaseminejad, Kazemi, & Pourdonya, 2018). People who self-disclose personal thoughts and secrets on the internet are more likely to have increased feelings of rejection (Molvavi, Mikaeli, Ghaseminejad, Kazemi, & Pourdonya, 2018). The internet can be a great place for some people, but for others it can increase the fear of missing out (FOMO) as perusing social media can show someone what they are missing out on (Dempsey, O'Brien, Tiamiyu, & Elhai, 2019). These concepts of FOMO, rumination, and self-disclosure on social media may act as catalysts to increase feelings of anxiety (Molvavi, Mikaeli, Ghaseminejad, Kazemi, & Pourdonya, 2018).

Furthermore, while financial problems and stressors are relevant at any age, student loan debt during college is a prevalent source of anxiety for undergraduates (Moxham, Fernandez, Kim, Lapkin, Ham-Baloyi, & Mutai, 2018). Many students have a part-time job at most, and many are not employed at all. This leads to minimal disposable income, and Moxham et al. (2018) found that students who were employed and worked at least a few hours a week had significantly better overall mental health and less psychological distress. These worries about debt and employment status can lead to anxiety. In addition, another stressor that involves financial obligations for students is living arrangements. Finding a place to live that is affordable and meets satisfactory criteria can be a difficult task for students and may add to the stress of the college life. (Kamberi, Hoxha, Shala, & Vehapi, 2018). In addition, the stress of living with at

least one other person can become overwhelming, and lead to anxiety (Kamberi, Hoxha, Shala, & Vehapi, 2018). Thus, anxiety found in college students can result from a number of factors.

### **Anxiety's Impact on Academics**

The American College Health Association (2017) reported that mental health issues, specifically stress, depression, anxiety, and sleep difficulties, are four of the top five factors that negatively affect undergraduates' academic performances. They defined poor academic performance as low grades on an exam or an important project, low course grades; receiving an incomplete or dropped the course, or experiencing a significant disruption in thesis, dissertation, research, or practicum work. In a survey of over 63,000 students across the nation of factors negatively affecting their academics, 24.2% of students mentioned anxiety, behind only stress (30.2%) as the leading factor. These challenges contribute to the potential of students dropping out of college early, with negative effects such as sloppy work, missed deadlines, and inattentiveness during the lectures occurring frequently (Nordstrom, Swenson & Hiester, 2014).

The primary worries of college students involve wasting time, balancing one's academic and social life, and caring for one's health (Klagsbrun, 1992). For most undergraduates, college is the first time in which they have to manage all of their time without any form of parental guidance. As a result, many college students have to independently choose whether to devote time towards their friends or their academics. Students with social anxiety, on the other hand, may not want to spend any time with friends despite the potential pressures of those around them (Burke & Stephens, 1999). This can lead to being pressured into activities they are not comfortable with, such as consumption of alcohol, which can also lead to impaired academic performance (Burke & Stephens, 1999). It was found that students with social anxiety prior to college are more likely to have trouble adjusting and balancing academics. These worries and

problems can lead to issues such as dropping out, strained relationships, and even feelings of suicidal ideation (Nordstrom, Swenson, & Hiester, 2014). Many symptoms of various types of anxiety, such as social anxiety, lead to lowered self-esteem, academic deficiencies, and relationships with peers (Nordstrom, Swneson, & Hiester, 2014).

With the increased stress levels that students are experiencing due to the new atmosphere and transition of college, undergraduates are experiencing difficulties they are not used to (Finkelstein-Fox, 2018). With increased levels of independence, many students cannot rely on parental figures as they used to, creating a sense of helplessness and panic which can lead to decreased grades (Klagsbrun, 1992). Combined with the increased difficulties of college-level courses and the added pressures of getting a career later in life, anxiety levels may increase even more (Plominiski, 2018). Before college, students' social lives were more structured, but in college there is increased freedom which can lead to procrastination and lack of focus (Nordstrom, 2014). Many researchers have found a positive correlation between amount of procrastination and anxiety levels (Glick & Orsillo, 2015). Since procrastination is negatively associated with grades (Glick & Orsillo, 2015) it could be inferred that the lower grades could create academic anxiety. However, it is also possible that the academic anxiety creates procrastination, leading to lower grades. Anxiety due to procrastination may result from the average student attempting to balance academics with their social lives. Not only does anxiety affect academics and success in college, but Miles, Szewedo, & Allen (2018) found that anxiety in youth can lead to worse positive coping and adult functional competence skills. Social skills are inhibited, which leads to problems in the school and workplace. These struggles effect self-esteem, self-efficacy, work performance, and other important aspects of life in both school and future careers.

## **Preventing Anxiety**

As cases of anxiety increase, so does the necessity to find methods of handling it. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) give college students with anxiety protections and accommodations (Coduti, Hayes, Locke, & Youn 2016). Despite services that are available, almost half of students who report a mental health issue are not seeking any form of help (Ward-Ciesielski, Limowski, Kreper, & McDermott, 2019). This lack of help that students receive could lead to the increasing severity of their condition. Since high stress levels has been shown to lead to anxiety in college students (Ngyuen-Feng, Romano & Frazier, 2019), predicting stress may lead to solutions on lowering anxiety. Several previous studies have looked at self-efficacy as a predictor of stress in college students. Au (2015) states that self-efficacy was associated with lower global perceived stress and higher life satisfaction. She defines self-efficacy as “one’s belief that one can accomplish a particular task” and believed that this belief had the ability to lower the stress of a student, and, in turn, lower their anxiety (Au, 2015, p. 425). People tend to learn and accomplish the tasks that they see themselves successful in, which stands to reason that self-efficacy has a strong effect on motivation performance and learning (Haddad & Taleb, 2016). A lack of self-efficacy could also contribute to increased anxiety. If someone has low self-efficacy it could lead to decreased performance which then could result in more stress and worry. In order to lower these high levels of anxiety, many researchers have looked at personal strengths in order to find a solution. Duan (2016) found that interpersonal strength lead to an ability to combat anxiety as focusing on these particular strengths led to lower anxiety levels. This could be correlated with an increase at resilience and being more equipped to handle the challenges that come with anxiety. Intellectual strength and temperance strength also were found to increase a student’s happiness and decrease their anxiety, but interpersonal strength was the

strongest factor. Muschalla (2017) explained how important resilience is in balancing anxiety, as strong resilience levels lead to being able to withstand and recover from different conditions. There is a possibility that these increased strengths lead to decreased anxiety because of better coping mechanisms. Hintz, Frazier and Meredith (2015) found similar results, as self-efficacy, confidence, and strength were all traits they focused in their online stress intervention for college students. The intervention was built around increasing self-efficacy and confidence through online modules and simulations in order to decrease anxiety. This intervention created significantly less stress, anxiety, and depression, suggesting that these variables are important in helping college students balance anxiety with their academics.

Additionally, a popular stress-relieving strategy studied in the past is taking a respite from work. Taking a break was found to be extremely important in dealing with worry and rumination (Flaxman, Menard, Bond, & Kinman, 2012). However, this can be ineffective if the person continually worries about their academics or work while on a break or if the break becomes a distraction. While students may take breaks from studying as a form of respite, it also could develop into procrastination. However, breaks from work can still be helpful if used the right way. Finkelstein-Fox, Park and Riley (2018) expanded upon this idea with their study of mindfulness, finding that those who partake in yoga or other activities have significantly lower levels of depression and anxiety. The process of emotional regulation was used in order to lower negative emotions while increasing positive ones. Mindfulness was found to be one of the most effective strategies for lowering anxiety (Finkelstein-Fox, Park & Reily, 2018). One subgroup of students that seemed to have handled the adjustment better are those involved in an honors curriculum (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013). Plominski and Burns (2018) tested this hypothesis with undergraduate students. Regular college students of all grades reported more

negative and less positive measures of well-being after a semester had passed. These non-honors students had significantly higher levels of depressed affect, which seems to suggest that honors students either have better methods of handling stress and anxiety, or the honors program makes them happier due to a supportive natured community (Plominski & Burns, 2018).

Prevention of anxiety seems to be a daunting task due to the severity of the issue, but there definitely seem to be ways of minimizing its prevalence and effects. College students do not appear to be utilizing services that are provided for them, but this could be because of a lack of awareness. These are just several of the strategies researches have discovered that potentially lower anxiety, but hopefully more will be found. An increase of effective strategies would help the college population cope with anxiety.

### **Treatment of anxiety**

In addition to the personal strategies mentioned above that are used, there are several medical methods that are used by clinicians to help treat anxiety. Several different drugs such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), tricyclic antidepressants, benzodiazepines, and others are used for the treatment of various anxiety disorders (Bandelow, 2017). The majority of people with anxiety disorders are treated with benzodiazepines, although they may cause CNS depression and other adverse side effects such as addiction (Bandelow, 2017). Many new medications are being studied and tested to see if anything more effective can be administered. Patients are informed about all of the possible negative side effects before drugs are administered (Bandelow, 2017). Switching to placebo rarely works with someone who already was on the drug, so there is evidence that these drugs are at least somewhat effective (Bandelow, 2017). A non-medical route to treating anxiety lies in psychotherapy. Almost all patients with anxiety disorders benefit from various forms of therapy, most specifically Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

(CBT) (Bandelow, 2017). CBT is a psychological therapy based on attempting to change thinking and behavioral patterns to help the patient help themselves when they are not in therapy (APA, 2017). CBT has been shown to have a stronger improvement rate for psychological and behavioral functioning than other forms of therapy (Laswon, 2010). Psychodynamic therapies, among others, are also used in treating anxiety, but most clinical trials have shown that CBT is the most effective (Bandelow, 2017). The most effective overall treatment for anxiety appears to be a combination of psychotherapy with pharmacotherapy, as both treatments seem to work together to produce the best chance of combatting anxiety (Bandelow, 2017).

## Research Questions

While there is a good deal of research on anxiety in college students and the effects, there is surprisingly little literature on how anxiety affects students academically and how students with anxiety disorders come to balance anxiety with their academics. This is certainly an area that would be of interest to students, their professors, and their academic advisors. The present study attempts to address these questions below through semi-structured interviews:

1. How does anxiety affect academic functioning in college students?
2. What sorts of anxiety-related interventions or strategies do college students try and find helpful in being able to be a successful student? In reducing the anxiety?
3. What sorts of interventions or strategies did they try and find not to be helpful in being a successful college student? In reducing the anxiety? Are there situations where interventions or strategies have helped one but made the other worse? Are there strategies they did not try?
4. Which people are viewed as helpful to college students with anxiety in being successful?
5. If a high school student with anxiety was anticipating college, what are some things they should know?

## Methods

### Participants

The participants in this study were five upperclassmen University students who had all been at their institution, James Madison University for at least one full year prior to the interviews. All the participants volunteered through an advertisement at their club, Club Cross Country and Track, which the interviewer was also a member, to be interviewed, they included:

Informant #1, “Max,” a sophomore, revealed that his anxiety began in middle school and has occurred intermittently since then. Both home and school appear to bring about his anxiety. His anxiety worsened as his class load increased. He has a formal diagnosis of General Anxiety Disorder (GAD). He has been to therapy for his anxiety and has been prescribed anti-anxiety medication which he has gone on and off of since middle school. Making the transition to college relieved some of the triggers for his anxiety but also created new ones. Particularly he experienced stress around academic achievement and the pressure of ROTC.

Informant #2, “Phil,” a junior, disclosed a family history of mental illness: his father had bipolar disorder; his mother had anxiety and depression; and schizophrenia ran in his grandmother’s family. His anxiety began in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade during a period when his parents were divorcing. He received professional attention at that time and was prescribed Zoloft, in addition to the Adderall he was taking for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). His mother was diagnosed with cancer in 2007, and then in 2013 his father was killed in an accident. He once again received therapeutic help. He was off and on medication throughout high school, and his anxiety worsened as his mother’s medical condition destabilized. Phil’s freshman year of college was the peak of his anxiety, as his mother was quickly approaching death. Phil reported that for most of his adolescence, he was in denial about his mother’s condition, but following her

death he made peace with it. He once again went to therapy, and his anxiety proceeded to decrease. He reports that he still gets anxious when family issues occur from his stepfather, grandparents, or sisters. When he gets anxious, it normally shows up in obsessive thoughts. Phil has no recollection of receiving a formal diagnosis for his anxiety.

Informant #3, "Sarah," a junior, received a formal diagnosis of General Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety, and Borderline Personality Disorder. She first started experiencing anxiety when she was 14 years old. She reports that she gets most anxious at the thought of tests, and that she often tries to make excuses to avoid taking them. Upon entering college, her social anxiety prohibited her from making friends as she was worried people would be constantly judging her. In addition to tests and social situations, her previous home experiences and potential health issues make her anxious. Sarah has been seeing a therapist since she was 17 and has been receiving anti-anxiety medications since her sophomore year of college. It was during that semester that she went to the hospital due to her anxiety and received inpatient care.

Informant #4, "Todd," a sophomore, indicated that his anxiety first occurred in elementary school after his parents' divorce. He saw a therapist during that time but has not received professional attention since. While school is the subject that makes him the most anxious, his body image and social standing also create anxiety. Many days before sleeping Todd reflects on all the potential ways in which he messed up that day. Todd never received an official diagnosis, and he has never taken medication for anxiety.

Informant #5, "Charles," a sophomore, first realized anxiety might be affecting his life after coming to college. He went to the counseling center, and since then he has completely eliminated caffeine from his daily intake. Charles has recently started therapy and has not been

formally diagnosed. He gets most anxious over his difficulty with time management and his lack of focus. He has never taken medication for anxiety, though he has taken medication for ADHD.

## **Procedure**

Several recruiting techniques were used to gather participants, including flyers distributed by the Counseling Center, announcements at club sports meetings, and recruitment in advanced psychology classes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurring at the beginning of the recruitment process, only five students had responded. Four of the five interviews were conducted via facetime, the final interview was over a phone call. Each interview began with the interviewer explaining how the process was going to work and ended with a small debriefing.

## **Interview Questions**

While this interview is about how anxiety affects you as a college student, because there are different types of anxiety and different age at onset and intensity, it would be useful for you to take a minute or two and tell us about your anxiety in general

Follow up questions (if not covered)

- Have received a formal diagnosis of anxiety?
- When was the initial onset of anxiety?
- What are the factors you are the most anxious about?
- How were your anxiety levels in your first semester of college?
- We are interested in some of the ways your anxiety affected your ability to be a successful student. Could you tell us about that?
- Did your anxiety affect you more in some classes than others? In what kinds of classes was your anxiety particularly a problem?

- Were there things in addition to classes that affected your anxiety and your ability to be a successful student?
- Have you been prescribed any medication for anxiety?
- Have you ever been to therapy or seen someone for your anxiety?
- What have you done to try and reduce your anxiety?
- How much faith do you have in your academic ability?
- What are some of your living habits that may affect your emotional health?
- Do you look to your friends to help you cope with your anxiety?
- How Anxious are you during studying?
- Do you ever take a break during your studying?
- How much are you on your phone when you are studying?
- If you had to choose, what are some of the biggest ways you've battled anxiety?

## **Results**

### **1. How did anxiety manifest itself during the transition to college?**

Three of the five students experienced the peak of their anxiety in the transition to college. While Phil associated this increase in anxiety with the deterioration of his mother's health, three of the participants reported that their anxiety was related to an increased academic load, and three of them reported that their anxiety was related to the social stress of making new friends. One student reported less academic stress in his first semester than he had experienced in high school, due to most of the classes being ones he had already taken. Three of the students experienced anxiety at the thought of being away from home for an extended period of time.

### **2. Were there things in addition to classes that affected your anxiety and your ability to be a successful student?**

Three of the students specifically mentioned their family or their homelives being causes of anxiety, and Phil cited it as the biggest causes. Two of the students mentioned personal image and self-esteem, and three students mentioned social issues particularly causing a problem. One student mentioned looking to the future and getting anxious, particularly about career planning.

### **3. What have you done to try and reduce your anxiety?**

All five of the participants revealed that talking with friends and exercise were two of their biggest methods for reducing anxiety. Two participants mentioned playing video games, one student reported list making, and three students mentioned changing their thought processes, including the two that have seen a therapist recently. One participant mentioned reducing caffeine, and one student mentioned mindfulness. All of the students also specified that distractions in general were helpful

### **4. How much faith do you have in your academic ability?**

All five participants mentioned having a high level of confidence in their academic abilities, despite most of them experiencing high anxiety levels from their studies. They all reported being capable of completing nearly any assignment if they sit down and focus. Three of the participants reported that if they worked harder, they would perform better in school. Two of the students reported that while they do have faith in their academic ability, they could still work on their self-confidence and self-esteem.

### **5. How do your relationships with your friends impact your anxiety levels?**

All five participants mentioned that their friends were one of their biggest sources of relief. Four of the five student reported that they are very comfortable around close friends, even with information this personal. Charles, since he has only been experiencing high anxiety levels for a couple of months, reported that he has not yet opened up to many besides his roommate. All of the other participants revealed that they have a wide range of people they talk to about their anxiety, in order to not put the stress all on one person. All five students reported college roommates being trusted sources. All of the participants also indicated that the type of people they live with have a high impact on their anxiety levels. One subject reported that when he is home, his stepfather causes higher anxiety levels, and another subject reporting old roommates as causing much anxiety. One student, who lives in a Young Life house, reported that having friends he can relate to religiously was useful, but he also felt as if he could not tell them everything for fear of them being too judging.

### **6. How is your anxiety while you are studying?**

Four of the participants reported anxiety during studying, but only on certain subjects. All of these students indicated that the more difficult the subject, the more anxiety the studying caused. All five participants reported taking breaks during studying, but three of them indicated that

breaks can be more distracting than helpful. Only one of the students reported their phone being distracting during studying, as two of them keep it away and the other two use phones for music purposes only.

## Discussion

This study aimed to increase the knowledge of how students with anxiety are able to successfully balance their academics and their anxiety. The participants indicated that for most of them, their first semester in college was one of the more difficult semesters in handling their anxiety. This was expected, but it was not as conclusive as the researchers believed it would be. Several of the participants acknowledged difficulty that first semester, but instead of attributing it to the transition to college as expected, they acknowledged external home life factors that led to increased anxiety. Only one student specifically mentioned the future and career planning causing anxiety, which was unexpectedly low. This may be because all of the questions were regarding the students' past and current experiences with anxiety. If the interviewer had asked about future stressors that may cause anxiety thinking about them, it is presumed that more students would have responded with career planning. No students mentioned money and student loans as a cause of anxiety, contrary to what the researchers believed. Again, this may be due to the experimenters not asking any questions about finances, so the issue was never prompted. Only one student mentioned wasting time as a cause of anxiety, and that student blamed it on his comorbid disorder of ADHD. Medication, a popular method of lowering anxiety levels, was used by many of the subjects, but only one reported significantly decreased anxiety as a result of taking medication. The other two students who have taken medication are currently off of it but have switched back and forth for several years.

Many of the techniques mentioned for reducing anxiety were expected and mentioned in previous research. Mindfulness, a technique that has been mentioned as helpful by many researchers, was explicitly mentioned by only one student. This could be that the other students have never tried practicing mindfulness, and many described techniques that were similar to

mindfulness. Another anxiety-reducing method expected to be more popular among students was respite. All of the participants cited taking a break as a way to lower anxiety levels, but when it came to academics and studying it did not seem to be very helpful. Many students cited study breaks as being distracting and not beneficial to their academic anxiety. In addition to this, these students reported surprisingly low anxiety levels in regard to studying. The researchers predicted that studying would be a time of high anxiety for students who worried about their academics, but the participants reported little anxiety unless dealing with a particularly difficult subject. This could be possibly explained by the levels of self-confidence the subjects displayed in their academics. Nearly every participant acknowledged mid-to-high levels of faith in their own academic ability. This contradicts what the researchers believed, as it was expected that students with anxiety in regard to academics would have low self-esteem in their abilities. Since most of the students cited the majority of their anxiety to academics, it may raise the hypothesis that maybe their anxiety can be attributed to another source, one they may not be aware of. This may be because anxiety has pushed these students to work harder, which resulted in better grades and higher self-esteem.

As expected, all of the participants mentioned how important friends and other relationships were to them balancing anxiety with their academics. All of the participants mentioned college roommates as people they often go to handle their anxiety. It varied how many people each subject talked to about their anxiety, but every participant had at least a couple go to friends they referred to. The methods of using friends to help with anxiety varied, as to be expected. Some people used friends as confidants, while others used them as distractions. Previous research suggested that roommate issues can be a huge stressor for college students. All of the participants reported their roommates being helpful for their struggle with anxiety. It

should be noted that all of these students were upper classmen who likely picked their roommates for this year. Only one student reported having a randomly assigned roommate this year, and he has developed into the student's biggest confidant.

Conducting the interviews during the time in which classes were online due to COVID-19's impact gave the researchers an opportunity to observe how having college classes online affected anxiety in regard to academics. The results were quite polarizing, as several students indicated much less anxiety whereas others indicated the situation was significantly worse. While the majority of the students admitted that the course load was easier, several pointed to their environments as not being as equipped to handle anxiety as their environments at school.

### **Limitations**

This study had many limitations that could be improved upon in the future. The students interviewed did not make up a representative sample of college students. They were all taken from James Madison University in a convenience sample. Due to the COVID-19 virus making its impact during the recruitment process, the only method that successfully reached students was an announcement made in a sports club meeting. All of the interviewees were involved with the sports club in question, James Madison University's Club Cross Country and Track team. This provided a narrow view of college students as all of the participants were from one club at one college. Due to the experimenter being part of the same club, all of the students had come in contact with him prior to these interviews. This may have made it easier for them to talk about their anxiety due to possible comfort levels. It also may have added a level of bias to the interviews which could have interfered with the results. All of the participants had experience with running, which may have influenced the results, particularly on how every participant mentioned that exercise/running helped relieve anxiety. Five participants are also not a large

sample size, but due to college moving online at the same time as the recruiting process, five was all that could be found.

In addition to the limited sample, because of COVID-19, all interviews had to take place over the phone as opposed to in person. Four of the five were on FaceTime in an attempt to retain a sense of normalcy, while the fifth experienced technical difficulties and just remained a voice call. Any of the responses may have been altered due to the current events taking place at this time. At the time of the interviews, the participants were one week removed from finding out that they would be online for several weeks as opposed to going back to their campus following spring break.

There are many procedures that could have been improved on. Recruitment should have occurred earlier, with a more extensive process. The questions regarding study habits and phone use ended up providing the study with very little additional information and were not needed. Several common worries for college students such as student loans could have been addressed. Managing jobs with schoolwork is a common stressor for college students, yet it was not mentioned in any interviews. There could have more questions asking about the students' involvements with friends as a way to reduce anxiety, as that seemed to be the most popular anxiety-relieving strategy. This topic could have been explored more in regard to roommates, as all of the students reported being happy with their current situations but may have had stressful situations in the past which negatively affected their anxiety. The information gathered on friends was useful, but this is an area that could be explored more in future research.

Further investigation into the topic of friends could provide valuable understanding to how human interaction can help cause and reduce anxiety. Other possible directions for future research involve expanding on students with anxiety having high levels of faith in their own

academic abilities. This seems interesting considering many of these participants are primarily anxious about success in school. Further investigation into this topic could reveal information about students' self-efficacy that could be used to help combat anxiety in college.

### **Implications for working with college students with anxiety**

According to these students, the most effective method of handling anxiety in regard to academics is by relying on their close friends. For many students with anxiety this may be difficult at first, as meeting new people can create a sense of worry and doubt. All of the students joined a club in their first two years of college, and one in particular tried to join her freshman year but social anxiety prevented her from going to any of the meetings. She revealed that once she mustered up the courage to join, she met many people who helped reduce her anxiety levels. All of the students suggested clubs and other methods of meeting people in order to build a strong support system while at college. Exercise was also often mentioned as a way to relieve stress and anxiety. The majority of the participants suggested attempting to rework their thoughts as a method of reducing anxiety. If they start thinking anxious thoughts, they attempted to reframe what they were thinking. This proved to be successful in many situations for the students and could be used by other college students. At the end of one particular participant's interview, he specifically mentioned that anyone who thinks they might have anxiety should see a professional as soon as possible. He believes that the first method in combatting anxiety is by seeking an expert's opinion and by getting the help that they may need.

It was the hope of the researchers that through semi-structured interviews, they would be able to learn more about how college students balance their academics with their anxiety. Several themes of coping methods were discovered, such as interacting with friends/roommates, exercising, practicing mindfulness/cognitive behavioral therapy, and other forms of distractions.

All of these concepts could be further investigated in future research. The finding that these students, despite their academic anxiety, still had above-average self-efficacy was interesting and should also be followed up. Overall, there is more to be discovered in regard to college students balancing their academics with anxiety, but this provides a foundation in which to begin.

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