



SCOPE Tip of the Week Member Newsletter

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Overcoming Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the most common reasons college students seek mental health counseling. Anxiety might be a focused worry that leads to panic attacks and extreme physical symptoms like a racing heartbeat, difficulty breathing and hysteria. Anxiety can also be more pervasive, impacting every aspect of a student's life with worry. Anxiety may be a symptom of more serious mental health problems, such as schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder. Ultimately, the term anxiety covers a wide range of symptoms.

What to Share with College Students about Getting Help

- 1) Anxiety diagnosis and help often require a visit to the campus psychologist or counselor. This step can be difficult since the student in need of therapy is already anxious. The added pressure of coming into a therapy office, filling out paperwork and telling one's story to a stranger often prevents students from seeking help for their problems. This is unfortunate, as many who come into therapy for anxiety begin to feel better after the first session.
- 2) Anxiety disorders respond well to medication. The medications can either be a short-acting calming agent (e.g. Ativan, Xanax) to address panic attack symptoms or a longer-acting medication (e.g. Zoloft, Paxil) to address more long-term worry. While the short-acting medications work in reducing panic, dosage is important. These medications can be addictive when used over several months and may take a little time to be effective. The longer-acting medications take even longer to reach a full effect, requiring students to be patient for several weeks as they build to a therapeutic level.
- 3) There are a number of self-help books and websites that share useful information related to anxiety. Most advice can be summarized below:
 - a. **Build strength to strength.** Many times, when a student is anxious they set up a black/white, right/wrong scenario in their head. This actually keeps the student from being successful in changing behavior. Say the goal is to talk to a professor about a late paper. The student never talks to the professor, being too anxious, and ends up instead sending an email. The student then beats himself or herself up for not being able to talk face-face to the professor and skips the next two classes. This all-or-nothing thinking can be common with those who struggle with anxiety and prevent lasting change.
 - b. **Control your inner dialogue.** Many of those who suffer from anxiety engage in negative self-talk, such as "you can't do this," "you'll fail again," and "what's the point of even trying?" which end up becoming self-fulfilling prophesies. While it might seem silly at first, changing these messages by writing notes with positive messages or starting the day with a few positive affirmations is a way to begin to change the anxiety behavior.
 - c. **Develop a realistic view of failure.** Often the expectation of perfectionism is the gas that fuels the car of anxiety. Students should realize what is realistic in terms of expectations. It is also important for students to learn to live a life in balance. While a 4.0 GPA is a

wonderful thing, more often than not, a 3.5 GPA and a healthy social life are better for overall mental health.

- d. **Watch for triggers.** Be aware of circumstances that have caused problems in the past (e.g. long car rides with someone else driving, not knowing what to say when put on the spot in a social situation, too many assignments due all at once). When students can understand the circumstances that trigger their anxiety, they can take the first steps towards better preparing themselves prior to the stressful experience. Perhaps they could bring music to distract themselves in the car, have a set of three interesting questions they can ask new people or develop a plan to organize and handle assignments when they all come in at once.

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