

Anxiety on the Rise:
The Cause and Effect of Increasing Anxiety among College Students in the U.S.

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Abstract

In recent years, anxiety has increased significantly amongst college students in the United states. Anxiety is the number one mental health issue that college students seek mental health care for. The increasing prevalence of anxiety among college students in the United States may be due to a convergence of factors including post graduate uncertainty, academic stress, financial burden and social pressure. The health implications resulting from anxiety are vast and have significant negative effects on academic performance and overall physical and mental health. This paper will examine these possible factors, why they have led to increased anxiety in college students, and their implications.

Introduction

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) over 40 million adults are affected by an anxiety disorder each year. When evaluating any mental health disorder, clinicians and mental health professionals reference the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, or DSM-5, to assess and evaluate the presence of a mental health disorder. The DSM-5 currently recognizes 5 forms of anxiety: General Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Panic Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Social Anxiety Disorder. While the cause of anxiety disorders vary, there are both biological and environmental factors which contribute to the development of an anxiety disorder. This paper will examine, in particular, general anxiety disorder, and social anxiety disorder among the college population in the United States. Anxiety is on the rise, and particularly amongst college students. The number of college students receiving counseling for anxiety has increased significantly in the past decade. The analysis examines the potential anxiety promoting factors which are present within the college environment.

There is extensive research surrounding the cause and effects of anxiety among college students, but its increased prevalence in recent years is cause for concern. While the common age of onset for anxiety is 18-22, the increasing prevalence of anxiety among college students in the United States may be due to a convergence of factors. College students are exposed to a number of conditions which could contribute to the development of an anxiety disorder. College encompasses many factors which can promote anxiety, such as increased stress and uncertainty

coupled with academic and social pressure. Today's college environment is an increasingly competitive environment, the pressure to succeed academically is heightened by post graduate uncertainty and financial insecurity. The college environment presents a number of stress factors, however the current economic and professional climate may be contributing to increasing anxiety in students. In addition, the increased use of social media in recent years may play an important role in the increase of social anxiety among college students. Anxiety has been linked to numerous changes in physical and mental health, such as poor academic performance, substance abuse, sleep deprivation, depression, change in behavior and social withdrawal.

Theoretical Framework

According to the Self-determination theory, fear of failure can significantly impact personal and professional success. While fear of failure seems innate, individuals who are faced with tasks they feel they may not accomplish are significantly more likely to procrastinate. Additionally, fear of failure heightens an individual's sense of uncertainty, which encourages self-devaluation. The College environment facilitates a vast amount of social influence which promotes certain behaviors. There are numerous theories in psychology surrounding the effects of peer influence on behavior. According to the generalized psychological and biological vulnerability model, humans are evolutionarily sensitive to social displeasure, such as criticism or rejection. This inherent fear has many psychological implications on behavior, decision

making, and emotional stability. Social influence theory seeks to explain the many ways in which social influence effects our behavior, decision making, and self-perception. Social influence occurs when an individual's behavior, opinions, and feelings are affected by others. Social influence can cause peer pressure, conformity, and socialization. Robert Cialdini defined six weapons of influence which may cause an individual to be persuaded or influenced. One of which is social proof, or the theory that an individual is more likely to engage in behaviors or activities that they see others doing. For anxious individuals, social impact can largely trigger and heighten the effects of generalized anxiety and social anxiety. This paper examines the contributing factors of anxiety and its rise in recent years, as well as the psychological and physical implications of anxiety.

Literature Review

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the united states; According to the Anxiety and depression association of America, approximately 18.1% of Americans suffer from an anxiety disorder. When we examine the college population however, this number is significantly higher than the overall population. As of 2013, the American Psychological association reported approximately 41.6% of college students suffered from anxiety, according to a national survey. Across the united states, the number of college students who seek psychological counseling is on the rise (Lowe, 2013). This concerning trend has gained increased attention and research, particularly in the last decade. According to an article published by the American Psychological Association, a recent survey shows that anxiety in college students is a growing concern among campus mental health professionals. The survey was

conducted by The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, collecting data from thousands of campus clinicians and mental health professionals across the United States. The survey found that 95% of college counseling centers feel that anxiety is of growing concern, and 70% believe anxiety among students had increased significantly compared to the previous academic year (American Psychological association, 2013).

Recent data also shows that across the United States, a vast majority of college students are reporting, themselves, as experiencing anxiety. In a report published by The American college health association, in 2017, 61% of students surveyed reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” during the academic year. This report surveyed over 63,000 students from 92 schools across the united states (American College Health Association, 2017). Examining the current literature, the increased prevalence of anxiety among college students may have many influencing factors, both within the college environment, and outside of college. This paper will examine the following contributing factors of college anxiety; Academic stress, post graduate uncertainty/financial insecurity, and social pressure.

Post graduate Uncertainty and Financial Insecurity

While college itself presents a number of stress factors, students also worry about the after-math of college, including finding a job, earning a livable wage, and post-graduate debt. In a survey conducted among 503 entry level-job seeking college graduates, 70% were either unemployed or working a full time non-professional job due to financial insecurity (Gradstaff, 2016). Additionally, Job uncertainty leads to financial insecurity, which college students are plagued with throughout, and after, college. The impact of financial concerns on college students has received increasing attention in recent years. According to studies, the average college senior in 2016 was, on average, 37,172 in debt for their undergraduate alone. And in

the U.S, there is \$1.3 trillion in borrowed student loan debt (Friedman, 2017). In a recent national student financial wellness study, 18,795 undergraduate students from 52 colleges across the united states were surveyed about financial stability. The study found that 7 out of 10 college students experience financial stress, and 60% worry about paying for college. Additionally, 32% of students surveyed reported neglecting their academics due to financial stress; 16% of students surveyed reported taking a break from school due to financial concern, while nearly 30% reported taking less classes for financial reasons (National financial student wellness study, 2014).

Social Media

In addition to the increasingly competitive job market, and post graduate debt, the rise in social media use has been cited as a source of both general and social anxiety (Alkis, Yunus, Kadirhan, Zafer, Sat, & Mustafa, 2017). College presents a new setting for many individuals; independence, constant socializing, and self-responsibility without supervision. Today's culture places such a high emphasis on outward appearance; money, looks, success, and unfortunately stigmatizes mental health. With the exponential rise in social media in recent years, there has been a lot of research surrounding the impact of social media on mental health. Digital media and social engagement has become an important platform within the college environment. Communication and social engagement is highly reliant on social media and technology. According to studies, students use of social media is positively related to their need to belong (Kim, Wang, Oh, 2016). One particular study evaluated the social anxiety scale for social media users (SAS-SMU). This study developed a scale which can be used to assess college students social anxiety as a result of social media. The study developed a reliable scale which found a strong correlation between social media platforms and the prevalence of social anxiety (Alkis

et.al).

Implications of Anxiety

Anxiety is detrimental both physically and mentally. In recent years, self-harm among college students has seen a significant increase. In a recent study, data collected from 139 universities demonstrated that students seeking help for a mental illness are at greater risk for engaging in self-harm behaviors, and are at greater risk for suicide. The data collected from 2017 showed that 26% of students who sought help for mental illness intentionally hurt themselves, and 33.2% had considered suicide. According to the data, this number was higher than the previous year (Locke, Stauffer, Rojas, Lockard, Scofield and Bartholomew, 2016). Anxious individuals are also more susceptible to engage in negative behaviors, such as drinking, substance abuse, and neglecting personal health. Drinking and substance abuse is a particularly common mediator for the effects of social anxiety (Villaroa, Madison, Zeigler, Noble, Jeremy, and Mohn, 2014).

In addition, research shows significant detrimental effects of anxiety on academic performance, as well as In recent years there has been increasing attention surrounding the effects of anxiety on academic performance. Many studies have examined the impact of anxiety on academic performance and test anxiety. Studies show that anxiety is shown to significantly hinder academic performance, particularly during tests (Clark, Fox, Schnieder, 1998). Additionally, Highly anxious individuals demonstrate poor study habits, and have lower grade point averages (Culler and Holahan, 1980).

Methods

The primary method used for collecting data for this study included library research. Peer review research articles were identified using the Purchase library database system. The method for collecting information was through the use of peer reviewed journals and scholarly articles found on the internet. Among the platforms used, much of the information collected was obtained through ProQuest, searching through peer reviewed journals. Additionally, through the purchase college library, information was found by searching for articles by subject (Psychology). Through the available psychology literature, specific databases were used to search for specific content. The main databases used through the purchase college library were psychINFO and PubMed. Additionally, google scholar was used to obtain scholarly articles cited in this paper.

Analysis

While Anxiety is the most common mental illness in the united states, the current literature suggests anxiety is increasing among college students significantly (Gallagher, 2007). The development of an anxiety disorder can be contributed to both biological and environmental factors. While genetics can play a role in the potential for developing an anxiety disorder, lifestyle and environment can be equally as influential on the development and progression of an anxiety disorder. This analysis examines the environmental factors, specifically within the college environment, which promote and contribute to generalized anxiety disorder and Social anxiety disorder. Among the causes of anxiety, the most common contributing factor is chronic

stress and worry. Chronic or increased stress can lead to the development of an anxiety disorder (Jang, Kim, Lee, Moon, and Oh, 2011) and college encompasses many stress-inducing factors. This section examines the factors present within the college environment specifically, which are believed to influence and promote the development of generalized anxiety disorder and social anxiety disorder. In recent years anxiety amongst college students has risen significantly. Based on the current research, this is likely due to a convergence of factors including; academic stress, post graduate uncertainty, financial insecurity, and social media. College students are under more pressure than ever to succeed in their education, with such a high emphasis on the importance of academic success. Students find themselves experiencing increased anxiety in college, and feel overwhelmed with the expectations placed on them in college. College presents increasingly difficult academic requirements with such a great emphasis on achieving post graduate success (Vye, Scholljegerdes and Welch, 2007). One of the most daunting aspects of getting a degree is facing the reality of post-graduate job opportunities. In today's economy, jobs are increasingly difficult to obtain without a degree. In fact, jobs are increasingly difficult to obtain even with a degree. A Bachelor's degree used to be enough to secure a promising career, however post-graduate jobs for bachelor degree holders have diminished vastly. Students are under great pressure to obtain more competitive degree's in order to increase their chance of being accepted into graduate programs. Majors which offer a greater chance of being prosperous, such as pre-med, pre-law, or engineering, yield far more work than a major in history or writing (Reilly and Chavez, 2014). Students are faced with the reality that a

Bachelor's degree will more than likely not be enough. The pressure to obtain a Master's or Doctorate degree not only presents additional academic stress, but additional financial insecurity.

More and more college students are also leaving school in debt. According to an article published by CNBC, student loan debt has tripled in the last century (Nova, 2018). Attending a public state school can cost over 100,000 to obtain a 4 year degree. Additionally, private universities can cost more than 60,000\$ per year. This staggering number has increased in the last decade, as tuition prices continue to rise. According to CNBC, in the last three decades, the average cost of attending a public 4 year college has risen 129% (Nova, 2018). Financial insecurity is a cause of great stress for anyone, however most full time college students can only manage a part-time job. Additionally, the jobs available for non-degree holders generally do not yield a substantial or livable income. Symptoms for generalized anxiety disorder include constant worrying, difficulty handling uncertainty, and inability to relax; all of which can be promoted by financial insecurity.

In addition to the burden of financial security and academic performance, the recreational side of the college environment can also promote anxiety disorders and anxious behaviors. Social anxiety is highly prevalent among college students; most students report feeling anxious in social situations at some point or another (Collings, 2010). According to the national institute of mental health, social anxiety is characterized by "persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others. The individual fears that he or she will act in a way that will be embarrassing

and humiliating.” However, social anxiety is a disorder which is often underestimated and undertreated. It is estimated that 7.1% of adults suffer from social anxiety, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. However, this number is substantially higher amongst college students.

College presents a unique environment which encompasses many of the contributing factors of social anxiety. Fear of rejection and negative evaluation from others are the catalysts of social anxiety. The college environment is comprised of a multitude of factors that contribute to, and amplify symptoms of social anxiety. Particularly for students living on campus, there is great pressure to make new friends in an unusual environment. This pressure to be accepted by peers is only elevated by the exponential rise in social media use, particularly among college aged students. College has been fetishized by television and movies, portraying a party-filled, social environment with less emphasis on academia. Additionally, the use of social media and constant updates on what other students are doing presents a compulsory obligation for students to be social and keep up with what others are doing. Particularly among college students, social media is filled with pictures and statuses of drinking, partying, and socializing. Social media has long been been as a stressor for children and adults alike, with 60% of people reporting that social media has had a negative effect on self-esteem. Teens and young adults, particularly those of college age, are under more pressure than ever to promote the best version of themselves, which leads to unrealistic expectations.

In Addition to social pressure, the classroom can also be a catalyst for social anxiety. College classes are generally larger than high school classrooms. Large lectures can have 200 or more students, creating a daunting environment for someone with social anxiety.

Implications of Anxiety

The college experience is not the same as it once was; along with the changing socioeconomic world, students expectations and obligations are changing as well. So, how does anxiety effect college students? Unfortunately, anxiety's health implications are vast, and college students are susceptible to a unique array of physical and psychological consequences. Unfortunately for college students, the effects of anxiety may directly hinder academic performance, and can lead to negative habits and behaviors. Symptoms of an anxiety disorder can range greatly, and can vary in severity. Some of the most common and prevalent symptoms associated with anxiety include constant worrying, fatigue, nervousness, trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, inability to relax, and irritability. The pressure of succeeding, coupled with the financial insecurity and social pressure young adults are presented with, leads to increased stress and worry. Unfortunately chronic stress and worry is a large factor in experiencing anxiety or developing an anxiety disorder. The stress and anxiety of managing academics and finances only hinders academic and financial success.

Stress and anxiety has been shown to significantly impact academic performance negatively. Students who report having anxiety before exams or presentations generally have poorer grades than those who do not experience anxiety (Chapell, Blanding, Benjamin, Michael,

Takahashi and Newman, 2005). Generalized anxiety disorder significantly impacts an individual's ability to concentrate. Additionally, lack of sleep is one of the prominent symptoms associated with anxiety disorders.

Students who do not meet their academic goals experience greater anxiety, uncertainty, and even depression (Beiter, Nash, McCrady, Rhoades, Linscomb, Clarahan and Sammut, 2015). Academic stress and uncertainty can lead to more than just anxiety, but significant lack of sleep. It's a common conception that college students do not get enough sleep, but anxiety can play a large role in this predicament (Zawadzki, Graham and Gerin, 2013). Lack of sleep is shown to significantly hinder academic performance and cognitive function, which promotes the unhealthy cycle of stress and anxiety. Lack of sleep can also lead to mood changes, memory issues, weakened immune system, and trouble with concentration (Pietrangelo and Watson, 2017).

The impact of social pressure and social anxiety can be detrimental both emotionally and physically. Low self-esteem is a growing problem among young adults, which only inhibits social influence by others. Individuals who experience social anxiety are far more likely to engage in harmful behaviors, such as heavy drinking. Students who experience anxiety in social settings are more likely to consume alcohol, and consume more alcohol than those who are comfortable in social settings (Villarosa, Madson, Zeigler, Noble and Mohn, 2014). Heavy drinking has vast negative implications on physical and mental health. Heavy drinking can lead to addiction and dependency, which can continue well after college. Additionally, heavy

drinking is shown to limit study hours, hinder academic performance as well as cognitive function. Students who report heavy drinking or binge drinking during the week generally have lower grade point averages (Wolaver, 2002). Unfortunately for individuals who experience social anxiety, the likelihood of succumbing to social influence is far greater than individuals who do not experience anxiety. Fear of rejection and negative evaluation from others are the catalysts of social anxiety.

Conclusion

While anxiety is the most common mental illness in the United States, its prevalence among young adults is particularly concerning. The average age of onset for anxiety is 18-22, which happens to be the average age of college students as well. While anxiety disorders may have genetic factors, environment and lifestyle can play a huge role in the development of anxiety. College presents a number of firsts, and a number of stress-inducing components for students. Academic pressure is cited as one of the leading causes of stress and anxiety among college students, which is only increasing with the current professional and economic climate. In today's society, the pressure to succeed is only increasing as young adults struggle to find employment and economic stability. College is plagued with uncertainty about the present and the future, leading to increased stress and worry for students. Unfortunately, with the changing world, anxiety promoting factors are inevitable, and college encompasses many of these factors. College presents a number of "firsts" as students face an abrupt transition into a completely new setting. High stress situations are among the most cited reasons for experiencing anxiety, and unfortunately collegiate academics can be highly stressful. While there is a difference between

average stress and an anxiety disorder, research shows that chronic or constant stress can lead to the development of anxiety disorders. College is an environment which presents a number of stressor-trigger components, which are only heightened by the current social and economic climate. Many college students have not experienced the independence and responsibility which they are presented with in college. College isn't supposed to be easy, but unfortunately getting a degree is getting harder and harder. Students in the united states are under more pressure than ever financially, socially, and academically. The obstacles that students are presented with are growing, and have poor implications on mental health.

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