# Communication and conflict: anxiety and learning

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Abstract

Many educators are unaware of what anxiety is and how it affects their students. Anxiety is when a student experiences excessive and uncontrollable worry about future and past events, excessive concern about performing competently and significant self-consciousness. Students with anxiety often have negative views about their ability to cope with stressful academic situations. They believe that they do not have the skills necessary to cope; therefore, they believe they don't have control or are losing control. Students with anxiety often misunderstood or exaggerated the importance of the situation. If the condition is not managed properly negative aspects can occur. There are many terms that are used to describe an experience of anxiety. This article discusses those associated with learning and ways students may be assisted in coping with this concern.

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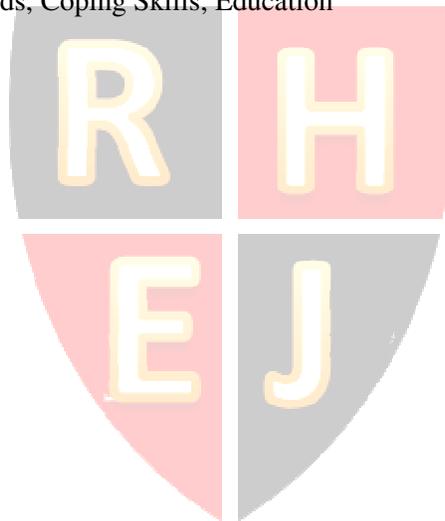
Anxiety is when a student experiences excessive and uncontrollable worry about future and past events, excessive concern about performing competently and significant self-consciousness. Students with anxiety often have negative views about their ability to cope with stressful academic situations. They believe that they do not have the skills necessary to cope with a particular threat (Wolfe, 2005). Therefore, they believe they don't have control or are losing control over. Students with anxiety often misunderstood or exaggerated the importance of the situation. If the condition is not managed properly (e.g. cognitive behavioral therapy), it may lead to a slippery lope of self-fulfilling prophecy (Vanin, 2008).

Anatomy of Anxiety

Everyone feels anxious at some time or another. Fear and worries are common in children, teenagers and adults. This is a normal part of development. For example, it is normal for a child to be afraid of the dark or monsters, but when the fear continues and the severity augments, there is reason for concern (Chansky, 2004).

Some people experience more anxiety than others, over events or things that may not realistically deserve an excessive amount of worrying. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stressful situation (Connolly, Simpson, & Petty, 2006). It allows people to react quickly and thus prevents people from becoming hurt in dangerous situations or perceived threats. Some people misinterpret events and tend to linger on their misinterpretation of those events, thinking them through over and over again.

In the school setting, anxiety is experienced often by students when being evaluated, such as when taking a test or giving a public performance. When test anxiety is severe, it can have significant negative effects on a student's ability to perform at an optimal level. Huberty (2009) asserts that text anxiety overtime, tends to contribute to more pervasive underachievement. He describes the consequences of chronic test anxiety including lowered self-esteem, reduced effort, and loss of motivation for school tasks. Stowell and Bennett (2010) studied the effects of online testing on student exam performance and test anxiety, they found that students who experience high anxiety while writing tests in a classroom, were found to be less anxious when taking an exam online. Thus, online testing and examining may be a great alternative.

A typical classroom consists of students from diverse families and cultures. Each family has diverse problems and issues that they are dealing with and each student has a distinct way of dealing with stress and emotions. Many times, anxiety initiates with such situations, within the home. Families go through events that may cause children a lot of pain and uncertainty. Children may not express themselves accordingly, which is when anxiety may show its first sign and presence. Anxiety occurs amongst many, yet children have the extra burden of carrying stress and confusion and not being able to express themselves properly or not feeling as if they are able to voice their feelings.

Causes of anxiety can be a result of biological and psychological factors that are intertwined in a complex manner. Academic anxiety is also associated with other emotional or behavioral disorders (Smith, 2009). Regardless of the cause or the type, academic anxiety can be managed. Teachers must be aware of the management strategies available such as positive reinforcement, clear directions, with examples, etc. will help students with academic anxiety perform better. Academic anxiety is often learned, which means they can be "unlearned". For example, a child may learn to be afraid of something because his or her parent is afraid of that thing, thus a phobia may develop. Parents frequently pass their anxiety to their children (Weiten

and McCann, 2007). Therefore, it is vital that teachers, parents, and caretakers are knowledgeable and prepared to help students with academic anxiety overcome their challenges. Interesting, academic anxiety is not just experienced by students, Tummala-Narra (2009) found that anxiety is felt both by students and instructors.   To enhance learning effectiveness, teachers are encouraged to identify anxiety-provoking situations and provide a supportive learning environment so that the learners can devote their complete working memory resources to the learning tasks. Anxiety consumes the resources of working memory, thus impeding on an individual ability to perform effectively.   Not a lot of clinical research on academic anxiety because many people just pass it off as something normal that students experience (Cunningham, 2008). When dealing with this concept one needs to deal with the following research questions:

1. How does a student with academic anxiety interact with others?
2. How does a student with academic anxiety operate in the classroom?
3. How does a teacher manage a student with academic anxiety?

How does a student with academic anxiety interact with others?

Children with academic anxiety often (withdrawn) choose to sit out of activities and not integrate in social activities with their classmates. They often complain of fatigue, restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, dizziness, nausea, stomachaches and headaches (somatic symptoms). They choose to avoid any form of situation where criticism may be involved and are constantly requiring reassurance (Foxman, 2004). Students who have academic anxiety also have a higher risk of developing depression, and often experience demoralization (Cunningham, 2008). Thus, academic anxiety can become extreme, and have negative effects of students' well being.

How does a student with academic anxiety operate in the classroom?

According to Cowden (2009), some students with social anxiety are afraid to speak and interact within an educational setting. Within the classroom, these students will often daydream and their thoughts will be thoughts filled with anxiousness, concern and uneasiness (Spencer-DuPont, DuPont, & DuPont, 2003). For example, these students may have a difficult time to stay focus if they heard about a catastrophic situation in the news, or if they overheard their parents or peers discussing a real-life event which may have no impact on their lives, these children tend to dwell and focus their concern on these issues. By the time they refocus and concentrate on completing their work, their minds will be filled with new worries about their academic, the quality of their work, their performance in exams, sporting or musical events.

Humans experience social anxiety to different degrees and in different areas. For example, an actor may by loud and bold on stage, but shy in an interview. Most people experience social anxiety at some point in their lives, the degree to which it occurs will vary from person to person. Social anxiety could be genetic or passed down from parents, a chemical abnormality in the brain, or it could occur after a humiliating experience. For students with disabilities, it could be a combination. According to Fisher, Allen, & Kose (1996), students with disabilities function under higher levels of anxiety than students without disabilities. Situations that students without disabilities could categorize as enjoyable or fun, students with disabilities could see as a situation that may end up becoming humiliating or awkward for them, which results in an escalation of anxiety. For example, in school when a teacher chooses to play a game where the students may have to come up in front of the rest of the class and write something on

the board, or say something to their classmates, students with disabilities may view that to be an unfamiliar situation and become anxious or nervous and not want to participate. Students without learning disabilities view the situation as a chance to have fun in the classroom and get up and be able to move and have the attention on them.

Social anxiety could also come from the amount of time a student with disabilities is in the general education classroom. Some services pull out students with disabilities for only part of the day or for certain academic areas, in which they may need extra assistance and some services may pull out students with disabilities for a majority of the day or most of the academic areas. This results in students with disabilities that are only pulled out for part of the day to have a lower degree of social anxiety. The reason for that is because they are more comfortable around their peers and they are more familiar with the daily routine of the classroom, which leaves less of a chance for surprises or unexpected events that may cause the social anxiety. Students with disabilities also worry about failing in the classroom. According to Stein, & Hoover (1989), the increased demands of the general education classroom raises the opportunity for failure, which creates higher levels of anxiety. Everyone experiences social anxiety to some degree about something during their lives. Students with disabilities often experience anxiety at higher degrees due to different
situations, especially in the classroom, than students without disabilities.

Social Anxiety Disorder varies from gender to ethnic background. Research estimates that 12% of the U.S. population meets the criteria for Social Anxiety Disorder with rates in other countries varying (Lee, 1999). Women are more likely to develop the disorder than men are. In other populations; however, the anxiety may present itself differently. Americans in many ways see the pursuit of their own personal goals as a sign of good mental health. As for other cultures, group goals are more important than individual goals. In cultures where the group is seen as more important than its individual parts, social anxiety disorders develop differently as people often become increasingly distressed about how they may affect others (Sanders, 2000).

For students with special needs it has been found that as a result of feeling social anxiety they are more likely to have more difficulty in skilled social behavior. This leads to the students not having very many friends which they feel is a result of their personality rather than of their lower self-confidence and social anxiety. The extent of this can be seen in a study conducted by Bierman & Erath (2007), children varies from age 13-19 year olds with spina bifida, 31 (53 percent) had had no social contact with a friend of their own age for at least a month prior to the interview. Also, Anderson (1982) found that just 6 percent of the able bodied group were leading limited or very restricted social lives, as against 29 percent of those with exceptionalities. Overall, due to their lower self confidence as well as the social anxiety they face, students with special needs feel as though many students do not like them when many times it could be the uneasiness brought about by their lack of social skills (Best, 2009). It is important for students with special needs to be given increased opportunities for interactions with their peers so that they are able to thrive in social situations throughout their lifetime.

Anxious children may also be very quiet, compliant and eager to please (McLoone, Hudson, and Rapee, 2006). Therefore, their difficulties may be missed. These children feel as if they need to keep their peers happy and do not want to "burden" them with their fears or issues. They try to please others to avoid conflicts and in many situations, this may result in significant stress on themselves and on their mental state. They do so by often suffering in silence.

Academic anxiety is distracting. For example, students who are preoccupying their minds with irrelevant things that do not pertain to the task at hand (Vassilaki, 2006). Thus, their

energy is wasted when it could be used for task elaboration or to help improve their overall academic performance. Students with academic anxiety are self-preoccupying and lead to their own negative results.

Social anxiety continues to affect numerous special needs students throughout our educational system (Cowden, 2009). Students with learning disabilities are much more vulnerable to academic anxiety, and will increasingly be accessing generic services (Bakala and Cooray, 2005). Some subjects, such science, can be perceived by many as a difficult and challenging discipline. Students often choose to avoid science altogether or take only the bare minimum that they need to fulfill degree requirements (McCarthy and Widanski, 2009). Anxiety in language classes can also be overwhelming to some students. Research suggests that how students perceive themselves as language learners can affect both their level of anxiety in language courses and their achievement (Phillip, 2008).

How does a teacher manage a student with academic anxiety (School-based intervention)?

Social anxiety causes individuals to fear situations. Many shy people feel so anxious when they are around others, that they start going out of their way to avoid any social situation. Many shy people avoid social situations altogether so they will not feel anxious and panic. By doing this, they will not have to worry about what they say sounding stupid, or most importantly, what others are thinking of them. Overall, because of these feelings, many shy people experience a lot of feelings of shame and embarrassment and negative self criticism due to them looking down on their own social anxiety. Social anxiety can also be seen in students with special needs. They are more likely to face this social anxiety due to the low self-confidence they feel about having an exceptionality. For example, when an adolescent student with special needs does go into a social setting in which they fear such as a party, they will usually stand off to the side to avoid conversations. The downside to doing this though, is that many people are uneasy with social anxiety in others. They perceive shy people who avoid conversations or walk away quickly from social encounters to be rude or stuck up. These feelings can clearly be observed in an article written by Alm and Frodi (2008). Similar to how many people feel uneasy, these participants explained they feel stressed out by shy people and upon meeting, the conversation is usually boring and uninteresting. The participants explained that they feel stressed because the shy people do not always contribute to what they are thinking or feeling. Consequently, these students with special needs miss out on socialization with their peers due to their own social anxiety.

Similar to fearing situations such as parties, social anxiety can be experienced in children with special needs throughout the average school day. For example, a study conducted by Younger, Schneider, and Guirguis (2008) studied 227 children from the first, third, fifth, and seventh grades what behaviors characterize shyness in their peers. The categories of behaviors most frequently described by these children included the following: doesn't talk, stays by self, walks/runs away from others, looks away/avoids eye contact, and gets mixed up when talking/stutters. Overall, similar to the students in this study these behaviors exhibited by students with special needs, result in increased loneliness. This is due to the fact that they do not have many friends due to their social anxiety and the awkwardness that others feel when around them. In the end, school may become a place of apprehension for shy children with special needs because they will have limited social interaction with other students their age. As a result of this, they believe their shyness is a negative trait which in turn lowers their self-esteem.

Children who are experiencing high levels of anxiety can be identified in the school setting. There are assessment tools such as a self-reporting questionnaire to screen which children may be at risk. These questionnaires are not to be used solely to diagnose children, but they are a good place to start. If a teacher detects that a child is over-anxious or upset, the parents should be notified and a conversation about this condition should occur. Many children who have academic anxiety tend to be very concerned about school grades and tend to express concern about every assignment and grade. Teachers may also spend time with the entire class talking about mistakes and how everyone makes them. Teachers may reassure that there will be plenty of opportunities to make up for marks and that the homework marks are not a direct reflection of the student's academic success (Iconis, 2002).

Teachers can help the students who worry about the effectiveness of their performance, or who are overwhelmed and dwell on their stress, to turn that anxiety into a positive, and make it act more like motivation (Weiten and McCann, 2007). Teachers can create a calm, comfortable test environment and to advise students if they are stuck on a question, to skip it and move on to other questions they do know, and come back to that question later, rather than waste their time. Teachers should be conscious of this susceptibility in students because tests should measure what a student has learned and should not upset students to the point that they cannot demonstrate their newly gained knowledge.

Sze (2006) suggested a few strategies a teacher can use to include students with academic anxiety include: breaking up tasks into smaller more attainable chunks, which allows more opportunity for success more often, and therefore promotes positivity and encouragement. Provides examples and specific steps to accomplish tasks; reduces assignment length so that students strive for quality rather than quantity (Sze, 2006). With practice, teachers will feel more comfortable learning about and using these techniques on a regular basis, and it will also allow students with anxiety to overcome some of their challenges at school which hinder their best performance.

LaBillois and Lagace-Seguin(2009) examine the relationship between a child's ability to regulate their emotions and the teaching styles and anxiety of children. Preliminary evidence suggests that different teaching styles might be associated with different outcomes among children with varied regulatory characteristics. Other anxiety reducing strategies including the use of flash cards for students to synthesize information from texts and lectures and learn good study habits; and to teach test-taking skills (Lagares and Connor, 2009). Teaching students to regulate their emotions is an important life skills for students suffering with academic anxiety. Conflict management, communicating with diplomacy and tact, and active listening are just some of the skills that can be taught to use in combination to tailor solutions for individual students. Teachers can use collaborative learning more and more to promote student learning and reduce student's anxiety associated to learning and testing (Ioannou and Artino, 2010).

Decrease anxiety involves relaxation (Albano, 2004). Teachers can keep their classroom from getting too noisy or out of hand. Students who have academic anxiety will be less distracted and less likely to lose attention. Thus, they will less likely focus on irrelevant things that do not matter to the task they have to complete. According to a study conducted by Kiluk, Weden, Culotta and Vincent (2009), results suggest that active sport participation may be associated with a reduced expression of anxiety or depression symptoms in children with ADHD.

How does the family manage a child with academic anxiety?

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Parents and other family members can help in many ways as they may be educated about how to manage a child's anxiety (Chansky, 2004). The family working in collaboration with the school is a very significant factor, as both the family and the school influence the child with anxiety level. Once the child has been assessed and parents and school have had the opportunity to discuss the situation, a plan can be initiated to assist this child. The school-family team is a great support system for a child living with anxiety, as it allows for common goals and strategies to be implemented with this child. Communication between home-life and school-life is key and is a great way to ensure that the child's health is being monitored, as much as possible.

It is important that parents are positively involved in their child's treatment of academic anxiety. Research indicate that direct parental behaviors can exacerbate anxious and avoidant behaviors in children (Albano, 2004). Taking this into account, and Sze (2006) teaching strategies, parents should also reward or encourage their child in dealing with their anxiety. Parents should also be in contact with their child's teachers and keep the lines of communication

open for any progress or important pieces of information about the student's psycho-social progress.

Conclusion

Academic anxiety can negatively affect the achievement and performance as well as social and psychological development among children and adults. The road to recovery is a team effort. Teachers must be aware of academic anxiety and how it may affect their students. Students can experience academic and social success, provided that good supports are in place, whether in schools or at home or both. It is absolutely crucial that teachers, parents, guardian counselors, social workers, and health professionals are knowledgeable about academic anxiety and prepared to help students who suffer from them overcome their challenges and live happy, full lives. Teachers can be part of the healing process, and students with academic anxiety can not only perform better academically but also socially, physically, and mentally.

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