

Strategies of University Students to Cope with Academic Anxiety

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The study was intended to find out whether or not a relationship exists between academic anxiety and academic achievement of university students. The study also aimed at exploring various coping strategies that university students may use to deal with anxiety. The participants of the study were 150 students of three teacher training programs in the Department of Elementary Education, Institute of Education and research, Punjab University, enrolled in the first semester. Data was collected through survey method. Results revealed a significant negative correlation between academic anxiety and GPA of the students. Most of the students were found to use problem solving and emotional focused coping strategy. The use of avoiding strategies was not common in the students.

Keywords:

This article can be cited as:

Iqbal, S. & Nasir, M. (2015). Strategies of University Students to Cope with Academic Anxiety. *Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 2(2), 13-20.

The early days of students in university are usually full of emotional life. The transition period from college to university put forward many challenges before students. They find new academic environment in which they have to work more independently than they had to do before. This new situation may provoke anxious feelings in students. Academic anxiety may affect students' academic performance, therefore, they use various strategies to cope with anxiety.

Anxiety is generally considered as a negative factor, however, it may function as a motivator. Mild anxiety positively affects performance by directing attention towards a particular desirable task. Intense anxiety, on the other hand, may negatively affect performance by disturbing thoughts and emotional state of an individual (Yahaya, n.d.). There are various

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sources of academic anxiety. Some students have trait anxiety, i.e. a natural temperament for anxiety. These students remain anxious in most of the situations. Educational history may provoke anxious feelings, for example, students having good academic record feel anxious to maintain their performance level and students with poor academic records have anxiety about their future performance. Unfavorable situational factors like time pressure, instructor's personality, complexity of task, etc. may provoke anxiety in students (AAAC, n.d.).

Anxiety has three interrelated components: cognitive, physical and behavioural (Vye, Welch & Kathlene, 2007).

- i. The cognitive component of anxiety involves our understanding and interpretation of our state of affairs which usually appears as negative thinking and judgment, for example, when students take a new course, they may compare themselves with other students and think other are better than them.
- ii. The physical component involves physiological changes and physical signs like fast heartbeat, tight muscles, trembling hands, etc, which express state of anxiety.
- iii. The behavioral component involves a person's actions and behaviours while facing an anxiety provoking situation. These actions may be
 - a. Adaptive that can reduce the intensity of situation, for example, one may think of organizing the material for an assignment when deadline is approaching.
 - b. Avoiding which result in more anxiety, for example, a student cleans his/her study desk at night before a test.

Some researches include physical and behavioral aspects of anxiety in on aspect of emotionality (Rana and Mahmood, 2010). The adaptive and avoiding behaviours may be referred to as coping strategies. Coping is an adaptational effort that an individual makes to overcome external or internal challenges faced during stressful situations (Tuncay, 2008). There are three types of coping strategies that students use for dealing with anxiety (Woolfolk, 2004).

1. Problem Solving: Students try to analyze the anxiety provoking situation and figure out various solutions to solve the problem.
2. Emotional Management: Students recognize their emotional state and try to manage their emotions.
3. Avoidance: Students avoid the situations that can provoke anxiety in them.

The effects of anxiety on students' performance have been examined in various studies.

Vitasari, et al. (2010) found that engineering students' academic achievement was negatively correlated with study anxiety; however, Al-Qaisy (2011) found that academic achievement of university students has a positive correlation with trait anxiety. Test anxiety was found have significant negative correlation with university students' achievement scores in the study conducted by Rana and Mahmood (2010). They found that cognitive factor of anxiety contributes more in achievement scores than do emotional factor. In a study conducted on graduate and under graduate students, Chapell (2005) and his colleagues found negative correlation between test anxiety and academic performance.

Generally it is considered that academic performance of students is negatively affected by test anxiety, however, research showed not only the test anxiety has adverse affects on students' performance but also the anxiety related to general academic conditions can affect students performance Nasir and Iqbal (2012). Ibrahim (n.d.) found that college students face highest level of anxiety at the beginning of semester than at the time of exams.

In the light of above review this study was conceptualized to examine the relationship between students' academic achievement and various aspects of anxiety. The study also aimed to find out what strategies university students use to cope with academic anxiety. It was hypothesized that various aspects of academic anxiety may have a relationship with academic achievement of university students. The following objectives were set for the study.

1. To find any relationship between Cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of academic anxiety and academic achievement.
2. To explore various types of coping strategies which university students use to deal with academic anxiety.

Method

This study was descriptive in nature and survey method was used for collection of data. The sample of the study consisted of 150 students of the Department of Elementary Education in the Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab. These students were enrolled in the first semester in three study programs of the department including MA Elementary Education (regular), MA Elementary Education (self supporting) and MA Early Childhood Education.

Two instruments were used for the study. First instrument was Academic Anxiety Questionnaire, developed by Nasir and Iqbal (2012) that was used to collect information about anxiety level of students. The Questionnaire consisted of 20 statements related to cognitive,

emotional and physical aspects of anxiety. The responses were taken as true or false. Second instrument was used to collect information about various coping strategies that students use to deal with academic anxiety.

The whole classes of students enrolled in first semester of three study programs were selected for data collection. The questionnaires were given to the students in the classes and they completed them on the spot. The data was analyzed with the help of statistical software SPSS-18. The relationship between the variables was determined by calculating product moment correlation coefficients. Frequencies of responses for various coping strategies were calculated.

Results

Reliability of the scale was determined by Cronbach alpha that was .76 for overall scale and for three sub-scales it ranged from .60 to .69 that indicated moderately high internal consistency (Table 1).

Table 1: Alpha Reliability Coefficients of Academic Anxiety Questionnaire

Name of scale	Sample Statements	Alpha coefficient	No. of items	Correlation with overall scale
Academic Anxiety		.76	20	
Cognitive	During class, I find it difficult to concentrate on the lecture.	.65	8	.71*
Physical	I sometimes feel my heart beating very fast during important exams.	.60	6	.68*
Emotional	Before registering in the semester I had a fear of new environment.	.69	6	.74*

Note: ($p < .01$)

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients were calculated to examine correlation of academic anxiety and its three aspects with academic achievement of university students. A significant correlation was found between overall academic anxiety and academic achievement ($r = .33, p < .01$). Academic achievement was also significantly correlated with only two aspects of academic anxiety: Cognitive ($r = .32, p < .01$) and Physical ($r = .30, p < .01$). No significant correlation was found between emotional aspect of anxiety and academic achievement of university students.

In order to find out what coping strategies students mostly use in anxious situation, frequencies of responses were calculated (Table 2).

Table 2: Alpha Reliability Coefficients of Academic Anxiety Questionnaire

Statement	True	False	Average
Emotion Management			
1. When I face a difficult situation, I talk about it with someone close to me.	97.3%	2.7%	
2. When I feel anxiety, I use relaxing exercises.	60%	40%	83%
3. Before starting a presentation, I take deep breaths and keep my nerves relaxed.	85.3%	14.7%	
4. During an anxiety provoking situation, I understand my emotional state and try to manage my emotions.	89.3%	10.7%	
Problem Solving			
1. When I face an anxiety provoking situation, I try to figure out solutions.	80%	20%	
2. When a deadline is approaching, I try to organize my work.	82.7%	17.3%	84%
3. If I cannot understand a lecture, I ask questions.	78.7%	21.3%	
4. During exams preparation, I use different strategies to understand and memorize the content.	96%	4%	
Avoidance			
1. During exams I give extra attention to cleanliness of my study desk.	66.7%	33.3%	
2. When someone reminds me a deadline, I avoid listening.	29.7%	70.3%	44%
3. I often leave the classes of difficult subjects.	8%	92%	
4. While choosing a topic for assignment, I prefer the easiest one.	73.3%	26.7%	

The problem solving strategies of coping with anxiety had the highest average percentage of positive responses (84%) and emotional management strategies had an average of 83% positive responses. Only 44% average positive responses were found for avoidance strategies.

In individual items highest frequency (97.3%) was shown in the emotional management strategy of talking with someone close when facing a difficult situation, 89.3% of students understand and manage their emotions during anxious situation, 85% keep their nerves relaxed and only 60 % use relaxing exercises.

Ninety six percentage of students use cognitive strategy of understanding and memorizing content, 80% try to figure out solutions for problems, 82.7% organize their work when deadline is approaching and 78.7% ask questions if they cannot understand lecture.

The least used avoidance strategy was leaving classes (8%) followed by avoiding listening about deadlines (29.7%). 66.7% of students avoid anxious situation by giving extra attention to desk cleaning and 73.3% prefer easy assignments to avoid anxiety.

Discussion

The results of the study support the hypothesis that academic anxiety has an inverse correlation with academic achievement of university students, that is, the students having higher level of anxiety had lower GPA. Only two aspects of academic anxiety, i.e. cognitive and physical, showed significant negative correlation with academic achievement; emotional aspect was not significantly correlated with academic achievement. These results are comparable to the study of Rana and Mahmood (2010) and Chapell, et al. (2005), who found significant negative correlation of test anxiety with students' achievement scores. Rana and Mahmood (2010) found that cognitive factor contribute more to test anxiety than emotional factor. Otten (1991) defines academic anxiety in terms of disruptive thought patterns and physiological behaviors that result from the fear of poor academic performance. These negative thoughts and behaviors of anxious students adversely affect their performance in academic tasks.

The study also revealed that university students use emotional focused and problem solving strategies to cope with academic anxiety. These results are comparable to the study of Tuncay (2008) which concluded that diabetic patients use emotional focused and problem solving strategies to deal with anxiety. It was an encouraging finding that university students mostly use constructive strategies to face challenging and anxious situations. Only a small proportion of students try to avoid challenging situations.

Conclusion

On entering a new academic environment, students develop a feeling of anxiety that affects their academic performance. Academic anxiety does not only involve worries about tests and exams but it is also concerned with the general academic environment. Cognitive aspect of anxiety which includes negative thinking and worries and physical aspect which include physiological reactions had strong correlation with academic achievement. Emotional aspect which includes negative or positive feeling was not related with academic achievement. It was also concluded from the results of the study that university students mostly use emotional focused and problem solving strategies to cope with academic anxiety. The avoiding strategies are not commonly used.

Recommendations

In order to reduce adverse effect of anxiety on academic achievement of students, educational institutions should arrange guidance and counseling programs for the newly admitted students. These students should be given training to use effective coping skills to overcome anxious situation. Teachers and senior students may assist new students to adopt effective coping strategies.

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