

Is social anxiety a hidden disability for university students?

July 6 2012



(Medical Xpress) -- Students are often expected to speak knowledgably in front of groups of unfamiliar people as part of their education. The assessment of student presentations contributes to degree grading, and employers expect good interpersonal skills from graduates.

Lectures, seminars, group projects, [work experience](#) and [job interviews](#) can all produce intense anxiety, fear of criticism, [embarrassment](#), and physical symptoms of sweating or blushing.

But in a number of cases, these uncomfortable symptoms may be more than a natural reaction to stress – people who seriously doubt their ability to impress colleagues may develop 'social anxiety', a marked fear of

social or performance situations.

Psychologists Phil Topham from UWE Bristol and Graham Russell from the University of Plymouth have investigated social anxiety in higher [education](#). They believe that while transient anxieties arise in most [students](#), in response to the social performance challenges of university learning, there is a significant minority for whom these anxieties lead to persistent, distressing anxiety and reduced engagement with learning.

Phil and Graham's research, recently published in *The Psychologist*, asks: What is the impact of social anxiety on learning? and How might academic staff recognise social anxiety in their students?

Phil says, “An estimated 10 percent of university students experience significant social anxiety.

“In our survey of over 1500 students at two Universities, self-selecting participants reported frequent anxiety in learning situations that involved interacting with students and staff. Among the findings was that these students habitually avoided learning situations like lectures and presentations by being absent or not participating. Some will even opt out of selecting modules that contain an element of presentation. The top two situations such students avoid are presentations and seminars.

“The aim of the survey was to find out about the impact of social anxiety. One interpretation of the findings is that socially anxious students could be missing out on learning opportunities and may be distracted from attending to academic information by excessively focussing on their anxieties.

“Another interpretation is that anxiety is intrinsic to the process of learning, whereby overcoming academic challenges builds confidence and fears of social evaluation recede. This view holds that by staff over-

focussing on anxiety and other emotions, this risks turning education into a therapeutic activity that diminishes rather than enhances the learner's sense of self.

“We believe that while it is developmentally unhelpful to treat students as unduly fragile, it is crucial to balance academic challenges with support.”

The researchers also looked at students' views of the support available to them in universities. Despite higher education institutions allocating considerable resources for this, students may feel reluctant to seek professional help due to a fear of being stigmatised, and may experience conflict between wanting help and fearing to expose perceived inadequacies.

So what is the best option for supporting students?

Phil and Graham conclude that the needs of students with persistent, troubling [social anxiety](#) fall between educational and psychological solutions. They believe that there are low-cost options for supporting socially anxious students and that these could be adopted within current structures for staff training and student support.

These include:

- Helping students get to know each other
- Sensitive appreciation of the shame and conflict caused in students by the desire to succeed and the [fear](#) of failure
- Staff and students working together to distinguish between anxieties that need academic support and deep-rooted concerns about self that may need specialist help

- Those with dedicated support roles – advisers and counsellors – should routinely ask student clients how they are coping with the demands of their learning to disentangle developmental from dysfunctional anxieties
- Not singling out students for questioning in lectures or setting assessed presentations in their first term
- Tutors should encourage student groups to practise presentations and accept a degree of discomfort in so doing, while discreetly supporting persistently anxious students

They conclude that it does not turn education into therapy if tutors encourage students to reflect on their fears about social evaluation in learning, and help them to explore their concerns with trusted colleagues.

Provided by University of the West of England

Citation: Is social anxiety a hidden disability for university students? (2012, July 6) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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