

Early intervention is key to support students with anxiety about starting university

January 8 2018, by Viviana Wuthrich



Credit: Keira Burton from Pexels

Roughly [one in five students](#) drop out of university in Australia in their first year. Students with prior emotional difficulties, who are doing their degrees part-time, mature age at entry, or from a lower socioeconomic

status background are [most likely](#) to be in this category.

Not all of these factors can be changed. But there are ways [parents](#) and students can prepare for the transition to university.

Students who have previously struggled with [emotional difficulties](#) or [mental health problems](#) are [particularly at risk](#). But the earlier the strategies to support these students are put in place, the more likely they are to succeed.

How much stress or anxiety is normal?

Starting university is a common cause of heightened stress. There are many new challenges to overcome, such as adjusting to a new learning environment that has less personalised assistance and greater emphasis on independent learning. It's also challenging to be in a course with hundreds of other students you don't know.

Most students adjust to these challenges, and the stress they experience should be temporary. But those who find change difficult, who worry excessively about their performance, are [overly perfectionistic](#), or are fearful of public speaking or exams are likely to find transitioning to university particularly challenging.

Students who find these things difficult on an ongoing basis are likely suffering from an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders tend to run in families, and [often start early in life](#). They have very negative impacts on someone's functioning and well-being.

If your child is skipping lectures or tutorials, avoiding class presentations or exams, failing regularly, not handing in assignments, losing sleep, constantly worrying about their performance or thinking they're not good enough, it's time to intervene.

What can parents do to help?

Fortunately, anxiety can be treated. Cognitive behavioural therapy is the treatment of choice for anxiety-related problems.

Cognitive behavioural therapy teaches people to change unhelpful thinking, and to face fears over eight to 12 weeks.

Learning how to manage anxiety takes time and practice, so it's not helpful to wait until stress levels are at a peak before seeking help. If a student has anxiety related to these circumstances, it's advisable to get assistance before they start university, or as soon as the problems arise.



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Parents can assist students to make appointments and possibly assist with gap payments for professional services such as for a private clinical psychologist or specialist anxiety clinics with expertise in [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) for [anxiety disorders](#). Assistance can also be sought from [local headspace services](#) for free.

Self-help resources that teach cognitive behavioural therapy skills are available online, including [internet-based therapy programs](#).

Most universities also offer student support services. These services can get very busy around exam time. So, it's best to tackle issues as soon as they arise – preferably before a student heads to university.

Here are some [tips](#) on how to deal with Exam Anxiety using CBT techniques.

Managing expectations

In addition to playing a role in facilitating early intervention, parents can also assist students by setting realistic expectations. These would be related to performance at university, and the time taken to learn new and often complex skills and theories.

Parents can also encourage students not to avoid classes or assessments they find difficult, but to enrol in support courses or workshops to enhance learning in particular tasks they're struggling with, such as an essay writing course.

But while parents are an important support network for university students, as young adults, parents have to balance support with encouraging independence.

Important support for students will come from other students in the same course. They will be able to provide information on how to approach an assignment or to discuss what a particular theoretical concept means.

When most students begin university they often don't know anyone else in the same course, or at least not in their tutorial group. Parents can play an important role in encouraging students to start up conversations with others in their course, encouraging them to get involved in university social clubs and mentoring programs.

Parental pressure [plays an important role](#) in academic stress in [high school students](#). And although it has not been specifically examined in university settings, it's likely to be a source of stress.

Parents need to prepare for the transition to university by managing their own expectations about what marks the [student](#) should be getting or what courses they should be studying. They should step back and encourage and facilitate their child to make their own decisions and to get external assistance if needed.

Transitions to university are difficult for most, but stress should be temporary. If your child has [anxiety](#) or had difficulties coping with year 12, it's important to seek help to prepare them for the challenges of [university](#) before they begin.

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