

Worrying levels of anxiety and depression symptoms among high school students

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According to data gathered from students at five Montreal high schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, teenagers report concerning signs of academic performance anxiety, generalized anxiety, social anxiety and

depression.

COVID-19-related [anxiety](#) appears to be less prevalent: among the 432 Secondary 3 and 4 [students](#) surveyed in 2020 and 2021, only 6% said they were very anxious because of the pandemic and 19% were moderately anxious.

These are some of the data from research conducted by Gabrielle Yale-Soulière, a Ph.D. student in the University of Montreal's Department of Psychology, under the supervision of Professor Lise Turgeon.

However, COVID-19-related anxiety is moderately associated with higher degrees of symptoms of depression, generalized anxiety and social anxiety, according to Ph.D. student Emmanuelle Ayotte, who contributed to the study. There is a weaker correlation between COVID-19-related anxiety and academic anxiety.

Symptoms of generalized anxiety, social anxiety and depression

In the study of students from five high schools in the Montreal area, 37% reported experiencing high levels of generalized anxiety symptoms, while 46% experienced moderate symptoms.

Generalized anxiety is characterized by worries that are difficult to manage; it is accompanied by symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, fatigue, muscle tension and sleep problems.

A high degree of [social anxiety](#) was reported by 32% of the student respondents and a moderate degree by an equal number.

One in two students (52%) said they suffered from depressive

symptoms, 26% to a high degree and the others to a moderate degree.

Finally, 15% of students reported experiencing high levels of performance anxiety associated with [academic achievement](#), and 18% a moderate level.

"Our results also indicate that these problems are approximately twice as prevalent among girls as among boys," said Yale-Soulière. "Non-binary students suffer from the highest levels of anxiety."

Academic anxiety is largely undocumented

The preliminary phase of the study is part of a larger research project on academic performance anxiety among high school students that Yale-Soulière is conducting under Turgeon's supervision. It is one of the first studies of its kind in Quebec.

"We wanted to identify tools that could help reduce academic anxiety and we realized there is very little documentation of this phenomenon, so it became the focus of our study," said Yale-Soulière.

The research team had to overcome some unexpected obstacles along the way. The successive waves of the pandemic forced them to recruit subjects for the study remotely.

"Initially, we wanted to survey 2,000 students, but because of the pandemic our partners at the five schools were overwhelmed with work," said Yale-Soulière. "Also, obtaining consent from 581 parents remotely proved to be no easy task."

PASTEL project aims to alleviate academic anxiety

During the first of the study's three phases, Yale-Soulière became interested in how young people suffering from academic anxiety can be reached.

In collaboration with Boscoville, Yale-Soulière, who is also a psychoeducator, is working to develop PASTEL, a program to assist teenagers in reducing academic anxiety. It is currently being tested with 48 teens.

"It's a turnkey package comprising six one-hour workshops for groups of 4–12 young people selected for their academic performance anxiety symptoms," said Yale-Soulière. "During the workshops, we share cognitive restructuring techniques, problem-solving strategies, exposure techniques and organizational and study strategies to help kids control their anxiety when studying or taking a test."

"Given the number of study participants and certain limitations of the questionnaires, our results cannot be generalized to all Quebec [high school students](#)," Yale-Soulière and Ayotte cautioned. "Nevertheless, they suggest research avenues for future studies and, above all, show the importance of helping [young people](#) deal with their emotional burdens."

Provided by University of Montreal

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