

Perspective

Unveiling the Unseen: Exploring the Hidden Struggles Faced by College Students

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Abstract

Mental health is a critical concern that affects numerous individuals globally. In the case of students in India, mental health issues are especially pervasive. The pressure to excel academically and conform to societal norms often leads to feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression. In this article, we will explore the mental health challenges encountered by Indian students and provide some self-help suggestions.

Introduction

It is evident that stress and anxiety has emerged as a prevalent and significant challenge among college students, often impeding their ability to fully participate in campus life. Without effective coping strategies, periodic episodes of anxiety can make the college years arduous and distressing to navigate. In today's world, it is imperative to focus on the mental health of students. A study published in the Asian Journal of Psychiatry reveals that more than 53% of Indian university students experience moderate to extremely severe depression. Research conducted by Your Dost indicates that a significant majority of Indian students (74%) suffer from high to severe stress. Furthermore, a study done by Ramzi M Hakami (2018), indicate that approximately 25.8% of college students struggle with social anxiety, which manifests as an intense and persistent fear of being observed and judged by others. Understanding and addressing this complex phenomenon is crucial in supporting college students in managing social anxiety and promoting their mental well-being [1,2].

As a psychologist with over a decade of experience working with students, I am intimately familiar with the far-reaching effects that anxiety can have on a student's life. Common contributors to mental health challenges among students include relationship issues, low self-confidence, low self-esteem, and low resilience. Such issues can substantially impact various areas of a student's life, including academics, social interactions, and even substance abuse.

Having worked as a psychologist for over a decade, specializing in supporting students, I possess a deep understanding of the extensive implications anxiety can have on their lives. Several factors commonly contribute to mental health difficulties among students, encompassing relationship problems, diminished self-confidence, low self-esteem, and a lack of resilience. Furthermore, students often grapple with feelings of loneliness, persistent negative thoughts, signs of depression, and an increased susceptibility to criticism. These issues

can significantly affect multiple facets of a student's life, ranging from academic performance and social interactions to potentially leading to substance abuse.

When it comes to academic pursuits, students grappling with stress and anxiety often encounter obstacles in various aspects of their educational journey. Participating in classroom activities, seeking assistance with assignments, posing questions, and engaging in group study sessions can prove challenging for them. Additionally, delivering presentations to peers or discussing academic concerns with professors may evoke feelings of unease and apprehension.

Are you afraid of being judged by others? Are you self-conscious in everyday social situations? Do you avoid meeting new people due to fear or anxiety about being humiliated, judged, and rejected? Socially anxious students may also encounter difficulties in forming new friendships, adapting to new environments, and constantly fear being judged or criticized, which can lead to social isolation. Attending social events such as fests, seminars, or informal gatherings on campus may also be challenging, resulting in feeling unheard and unrecognized by peers.

Furthermore, anxiety can increase the risk of substance abuse, as some students may turn to drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism to alleviate overwhelming anxiety in social situations. However, relying on substances as a coping strategy can lead to further challenges and negative consequences in the future, exacerbating the issue.

Furthermore, students may contend with feelings of isolation, persistent negative thoughts, symptoms of depression, and an increased vulnerability to criticism. These challenges can have a profound impact on their overall well-being and quality of life, highlighting the need for appropriate intervention and support to address the multifaceted impacts of anxiety on college students.

It is important to understand that stressors in life can trigger worry and overthinking, leading to anxiety and fear. It is crucial to remember that these feelings are common and you are not alone in experiencing them. Our internal dialogue often referred to as the "critical inner voice" or "Inner Critic," can intensify feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear. Our minds can be constantly racing, jumping from one thought to another, like monkeys jumping from branch to branch, which can heighten anxiety and worry. Frequent feelings of restlessness, concern, remorse, unease, fury, criticalness, bitterness, discontent, detachment, misinterpretation, sorrow, insecurity, melancholy, and self-uncertainty often consume a significant portion

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of our emotional reserves and disrupt our emotional world, as we navigate through our daily lives. Many people are not aware of how much these internalized emotional patterns control their inner landscape. These patterns dilute and weaken positive emotional experiences, relationships, and motivation for personal growth. Eventually, it becomes a defining aspect of one's self-identity.

Insecurity often leads to seeking external validation and acceptance, which can result in overdependence on external factors. While it may feel scary, it is important to face the circumstances, whether we feel accepted or not. It is normal to experience moments of weakness that make us feel like we've been thrown into the deep end. However, it is important to remind ourselves that it is okay to feel this way. It is okay not to be okay. It takes time to adjust, and it is crucial to give ourselves the space to breathe, reflect on negative thoughts, and reinforce positive ones. Just like flowers need time to take root and blossom, we too need time to grow and thrive.

Negative emotions such as fear, uncertainty, and insecurity can have a toxic effect on our body and mind, leading to the release of stress hormones. The emotions and attitudes of care, courage, tolerance, and appreciation have a positive impact on our neurochemistry, which can help to regenerate our system, counteract the effects of negative emotions and builds resilience.

According to HeartMath researchers, there is a connection between the Heart and the Brain, and they collaborate to regulate both emotional and cognitive responses. The variations in the heart rhythm patterns and beat-to-beat changes have an effect on information processing, feelings, and creativity. Stress is not created by the event or situation itself; it is our emotional response to the stressful event that has a significant impact on our mind, body, and spirit. By developing self-regulation skills and transforming stress, we can enhance our "Resilience Capacity" [3].

I absolutely agree that it is crucial to help students develop effective coping strategies. By acknowledging and addressing the impact of negative emotions and intentionally cultivating strategies to boost positive emotions, students can develop the skills needed to manage stress and adversity effectively, ultimately building resilience. Building resilience enables students to adapt more effectively to challenging circumstances and bounce back from setbacks, ultimately enhancing their mental health and wellbeing.

Learning to manage our thoughts and emotions is the key to managing stress and anxiety. Increasing self-esteem involves paying attention to our negative thoughts and actively working on changing them. Developing awareness allows us to identify and address negative thoughts in a more self-accepting manner, rather than being overly critical of ourselves.

Yes, alternative therapy approaches for anxiety can indeed encompass a wide range of techniques, including holistic practices and complementary and integrative therapies.

Self-help Tips

Here are some Self-help tips that can help individuals struggling with anxiety:

Embrace the awkward

Acknowledging that there will be awkward moments and mistakes in life and choosing to embrace them can enhance our sense of comfort in our own skin.

Doing a reality check

Ask yourself, "On a scale of 1 to 100, how likely is it that the thing I'm anxious about will happen? Do I have good reasons to think something will go wrong? Is there a chance I'm overly worried?" These questions help you to evaluate the probability of the event actually occurring, rather than relying on your emotional reaction, assess whether your worries are based on actual evidence and facts or exaggerated and disproportionate to the actual risk [4].

Challenge negative thoughts

It's common to be hard on ourselves when facing difficulties, but being self-critical can keep us trapped in a negative cycle of shame and self-hate. One technique is to write down your negative thoughts in third person. It is also known as cognitive distancing. It can help us gain perspective on our thoughts and emotions by separating ourselves from them and allows us to observe our thoughts more objectively and without judgment, which can reduce the intensity of negative emotions and help us develop a more balanced perspective.

Reflect on what you've learned

Consider what insights you can gain from your experiences and use them as lessons to create a better outcome in the future. Refocus on the positive aspects of the situation and how it has helped you grow.

Stay in the present moment

When we feel anxious, our minds often race ahead to potential future scenarios, and we may start to feel overwhelmed and powerless. Redirecting our attention to the present moment can help us ground ourselves and reduce anxiety. One way to do this is to focus on our physical sensations, such as our breath, the feeling of our feet on the ground, or the temperature of the air around us. This can help bring us back to the present moment and give us a sense of control.

Relabel what's happening

Relabeling is a technique used in cognitive-behavioral therapy to help individuals reframe or reinterpret their thoughts and emotions in a more positive or realistic light. The goal is to shift from a negative or distorted perspective to a more accurate and constructive one. For example, instead of seeing a situation as overwhelming or hopeless, you might choose to view it as a challenge or an opportunity for growth. By relabeling your thoughts and emotions, you can gain greater control over your reactions and improve your overall well-being.

Build a supportive network

Surrounding oneself with supportive and understanding individuals can make a big difference in managing anxiety. College students can seek out like-minded individuals and participate in activities that align with their values and interests.

Engage in activities that bring joy

Make time for activities that bring you happiness and fulfillment. Consider learning a new skill or pursuing a hobby that you've always been interested in. Nurturing your own interests and well-being can contribute to a positive sense of self-worth.

Practice self-compassion

Self-compassion involves treating ourselves with kindness, understanding, and acceptance, just as we would treat a close friend who is struggling. When we practice self-compassion, we acknowledge our mistakes and shortcomings without judgment or self-blame, and

we focus on learning and growth rather than on our perceived flaws. By being kind and forgiving to ourselves, we can break the cycle of shame and self-hate and cultivate a more positive and healthy relationship with ourselves.

Positive mindset

I recommend maintaining a positive mindset when facing new challenges. It's common for negative thoughts to arise, such as "I can't do this," "This is too hard," or "I'll look like a fool." However, it's important to acknowledge these thoughts without letting them take over. Instead, affirm that even though challenges may exist, you have the ability to conquer them. Regularly practicing this type of positive thinking can help you overcome the constant influx of negative emotions that may cloud your mind.

Gratitude journal

According to Sansone and Sansone (2010), gratitude involves the recognition and acknowledgement of positive experiences or outcomes, leading to a feeling of appreciation. Studies by Jans-Beken et al. (2020) suggest that gratitude is positively associated with social, emotional, and psychological well-being. One effective way to cultivate gratitude is to keep a gratitude journal, where you jot down things you are thankful for on a daily basis. This practice helps you identify and reflect on people, events, or things that bring positivity into your life [5,6].

Lifestyle changes

Engaging yourself in regular physical exercise, practice good sleep hygiene, and maintain a healthy diet can have a positive impact on your mental well-being. Exercise releases endorphins, which can help you feel more positive and reduce stress levels. Lack of sleep can exacerbate anxiety symptoms. Aim for at least 7-8 hours of sleep per night. Avoid processed and sugary foods and instead opt for a diet rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins. Stimulants like caffeine and alcohol can exacerbate anxiety symptoms, so it's best to consume them in moderation.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage one's emotions by calming oneself down during distressing situations and uplifting oneself during low moods. By acquiring self-regulation skills, individuals can effectively navigate through life's challenges and stressors. One potent and efficient tool for enhancing self-regulation is the Heart-Focused Breathing Technique. This technique allows individuals to maintain composure during difficult circumstances and neutralize emotional reactions on the spot. To practice this technique, focus your attention on your heart region and visualize your breath flowing in and out of your chest, taking slightly deeper and slower breaths than your typical breathing pattern. Find a comfortable and effortless rhythm for your breath and practice the technique for 30 seconds to one minute, at least three to five times each day. It's essential to keep your eyes open while doing this exercise.

Mindfulness

By practicing mindfulness, individuals can learn to observe their thoughts and emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them or reacting impulsively. Incorporating sensory awareness into breathing exercises can be a powerful way to cultivate mindfulness and presence. One way to practice this technique is to find a quiet and comfortable place to sit, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. As you inhale and exhale, begin to notice what you can see around you - the colors,

shapes, and textures of your surroundings. Then, shift your attention to what you can hear, focusing on the sounds in the environment around you and any subtle noises you may not have noticed before. Next, bring your attention to what you can smell, taking note of any scents in the air. Then,

Focus on what you can feel on your skin the temperature, the texture of your clothing, and any sensations of pressure or contact. Finally, turn your attention inward and notice any tastes in your mouth or sensations in your body. Throughout this practice, continue to focus on your breath, using it as an anchor to bring your attention back to the present moment whenever your mind wanders.

The 3-3-3 rule

It is a grounding technique that can help alleviate anxiety and promote mindfulness. Look around you and name three things you see. This step helps you to focus on your surroundings and engage your senses. Name three sounds you hear. This step helps you to tune in to the sounds around you and further ground you in the present moment. Move three parts of your body - your ankle, fingers, or arm. This step helps you to release physical tension and bring attention to your body [7]. Whenever you feel overwhelmed by racing thoughts or intense emotions, practicing the 3-3-3 rule can help you regain your balance and shift your focus to the present moment.

Art therapy

Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art materials and creative processes as a means of self-expression and exploration. Through the use of different art materials and techniques, individuals can communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a non-verbal way. Art therapy can also help individuals build self-confidence and self-esteem. One can also learn to manage one's anxiety by using art as a coping mechanism. Mandala and Zen doodling are few of the techniques you can use.

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)

EFT is a holistic therapy based on Chinese theory of acupuncture that involves tapping on specific acupressure points on the body while focusing on emotional issues. The tapping technique may help individuals manage the emotional intensity associated with anxiety, reduce negative emotions such as fear and stress, and shift their focus away from anxious thoughts and promote relaxation. This technique involves tapping specific points on the body while repeating affirmations to reduce negative emotions. Here are the steps to follow: 1. Identify something that's bothering you, such as a stressful situation, and rate its intensity on a scale of 0 to 10 (10 being the worst). 2. Create a statement that describes your issue and includes a component of self-acceptance, such as "Even though I'm stressed about this situation, I deeply and completely accept myself". 3. Repeat a shortened version of that statement while tapping each of the following points several times, in this order: the side of your hand (karate chop point), eyebrow, side of eye, under eye, under nose, chin, collarbone, underarm, and karate chop. Use two to three fingers to tap each point firmly, while taking deep breaths and focusing on your statement. 4. After one round rate the intensity of your negative emotion again on a scale of 0 to 10, and repeat the tapping process until the number decreases and you feel better [8].

Jin Shin Jyutsu

Jin Shin Jyutsu is an ancient Japanese art that was rediscovered in the early 1900s by Master Jiro Murai. It facilitates the unhindered

flow of energy within the body to promote healing. The core belief of this practice is that any ailment, whether physical, emotional, or mental, arises due to an obstacle in the energy flow. To perform this technique, gently hold each finger with all the fingers of the other hand wrapped around it, while breathing deeply, until you sense a gentle pulse. Practicing deep and relaxed breathing can be beneficial when practicing self-help techniques. Finally, complete the process by bring your hands together in front of your chest, with one palm resting on top of the other as if you are holding or covering something. Take nine deep breaths, focusing on the sensation of the breath moving in and out of your body, and on the feeling of your hands resting on each other. After the ninth breath, release your hands and take a moment to notice how you feel. You may feel more relaxed, centered, and present in the moment [9,10].

Conclusion

As a psychologist, I understand how stress and anxiety can deeply affect a student's overall well-being. Therefore, my goal is to provide appropriate interventions and support that can address these challenges. By using evidence-based strategies and interventions, we can collaborate to help students manage their anxiety effectively and improve their mental health and well-being. I strongly advise you to prioritize your mental well-being and take advantage of these techniques as valuable tools for personal growth and resilience. Although these self-help techniques are aimed at students, they have been proven to be effective for people of all ages.

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