

How to Deal with an Anxious Student

We all experience fear and anxiety at different intensities. For some students, anxiety may prevent them from functioning at school, work and in their personal lives. Approximately 12% of the population live with an anxiety disorder. Most individuals will experience their first anxiety episode by the age of 21. Though many students experience a manageable degree of stress during their studies, some students may actually have documented anxiety disorders. These students may be eligible for some learning accommodations and should speak to a counselor in Student Services.

Scenario:

Andrea is an 18-year old student who is constantly worried. She is continuously asking questions about upcoming assignments and tests as she is anxious that she will fail. You have noticed that she is always in a state of panic, sweats a lot and tends to fidget with her pencil throughout class. She has been handing in weekly assignments, but she has missed three tests stating that she was sick.

Problem:

Anxious students, such as Andrea, have a heightened sense of fear and danger even though they are often unaware of what causes their anxiety. There is a significant intolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Unknown and unfamiliar situations may increase their anxiety as well as unrealistic and/or illustrious self-expectations. Anxious students are full of doubt which is closely tied to their own sense of personal value. They have a tendency to avoid situations, people or things that make them anxious such as oral presentations, pop-quizzes, or improvisations.

What to do:

- Show empathy. Respond in an empathic and cooperative manner. Let them know that you care about their well-being and want to help them.
- Allow the student to express their feelings and thoughts. Listening may contribute to reducing the student's level of worry.
- Be clear and precise with your instructions on an essay, test or assignment. Provide information in small doses.
- Offer reassurance by clarifying the task or steps in a project or essay.
- Recommend that the student seek help from an academic advisor (for concerns related to academic studies), counselor (if the student becomes overly anxious), learning centre (for academic skill development) or the nurse (for health related inquiries).

What to avoid:

- Bombarding the student with information, ideas, questions, concerns, suggestions or increasing your demands as a means to motivate the student.
- Conducting an unplanned form of evaluation or assessment.
- Emphasizing the dire outcome of failing a test or assignment, making a mistake or having difficulty with a task.
- Taking on responsibility for the student's emotional state of being by allowing her or him to avoid the sources of worry.

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