

Coping with College Series

Coping With Anxiety

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It's hard to breathe, you have an overwhelming feeling of dread, your stomach feels sick, images of disaster are racing through your mind, and you have cold sweats. What's happening to you? If it's not that nasty flu that's been going around, you are probably in the grip of anxiety.

Anxiety is a problem more common than you might think. Everyone experiences anxiety to some degree. It is nature's alarm system to signal fight or flight in times of danger, adaptive if you see a bear in the woods. However most situations don't literally require fight or flight. They require social or mental performance.

Some anxiety is positive. Social psychology research has shown that moderate levels of anxiety enhance performance for a familiar or well rehearsed task. However, many people suffer from debilitating anxiety disorders of different types. Anxiety is one of the most frequently reported health problems.

There are many types of anxiety ranging from common phobias to more severe and persistent anxiety disorders that can cripple your ability to engage in routine activities. Many factors may lead to the development of anxiety disorders including faulty learning, a nervous system that is more reactive to stress, physical illness, or excessive levels of stress. Whatever the cause, anxiety can detract from one's enjoyment of life and ability to enjoy change.

One of the things that makes anxiety difficult to treat is that people frequently cope with anxiety by avoiding. It's natural to avoid things that make you feel anxious. Unfortunately, avoiding also prevents new learning that can help you overcome the anxiety.

Psychologists often help people desensitize to situations that cause anxiety through use of relaxation, imagery, and coping skills. Thinking patterns that increase anxiety are often a focus of treatment. Three common thinking errors that are associated with anxiety are: (1) **over-estimating** danger in a situation -- most things we "worry" about never actually occur; (2) **under-estimating** your ability to cope in that situation -- we often expect ourselves to perform much worse than we actually do; and (3) **under-estimating** the "rescue" factors that will be available -- even if things go poorly there are often other people that may come to your aid.

If you think you may suffer from anxiety, you are not alone. Many students seek treatment through Student Counseling Services. Treatment may not make the anxiety completely disappear but it can help you reduce the symptoms and learn to cope more effectively.