

Under pressure: How young people cope with anxiety

September 18 2019



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Dr. Valerie Sotardi from the University of Canterbury (UC)'s College of Education, Health & Human Development researches assessment-related anxiety in first-year students. The educational psychologist recently

developed online resources to help young people access practical coping strategies, and resources to upskill teachers, too.

"Anxiety is a big problem, but it is not especially new. People have had assessment-related concerns for hundreds of years," she says.

"However, the education system and workplaces have changed, and frequent, high-stakes assessments can put a lot of pressure on students. I worry that many students are not learning how to effectively manage such performance challenges—and this is not necessarily their fault."

Although stress and [anxiety](#) are often used interchangeably in public dialog, they are different. Stress tends to be a direct response to specific demands (such as reading 20 pages for class by tomorrow), and can have important motivational properties. Anxiety, by contrast, is anticipatory in nature and focuses on perceived threats that may or may not occur in the future.

"Any time we challenge ourselves, stress will be a natural part of learning. Any time we value our performance, stress will be a natural part of assessment. It's crucial for students to remember that these are typical experiences, and nothing to be ashamed of."

However, if stress is not managed properly it can turn into anxiety, and first-year students can be particularly vulnerable to this as they adjust to university life, Dr. Sotardi says.

"In my years of teaching first-years, it has been clear to me that university performance, achievement, and wellbeing are often hindered because of anxiety and related concerns. Although these challenges are experienced in other stages, assessment-related anxiety is particularly pronounced in schooling transitions, when the whole system—from classroom structure to grading scales—may change."

Given that anxiety is a [common experience](#), the importance of learning how to cope with it is an essential skill. Dr. Sotardi's resources, co-authored with Erik Brogt, an Associate Professor in the Learning Evaluation and Academic Development team, encourage students to be proactive.

"I hope these resources will inspire students to think more critically about what they can do to reduce, and, ideally, prevent anxiety when assessments feel overwhelming. Learning how to navigate tricky situations is a professional and personal goal I'd encourage all students to consider learning."

When talking with students about [stress](#) and anxiety, Dr. Sotardi reminds them there are mental health support and resources available on campus, such as UC's Student Care team. "They are professionals who really care about students, and they are a good place to start if students aren't sure where to go."

Dr. Sotardi's best advice for helping students cope with assessment-related anxiety is "seek help before things get too serious. Help-seeking behaviors are essential when you're looking for practical advice, emotional support, or both. Think about what you need most and who can best assist you. It's easy to dismiss anxiety, but if it's looming over you, it's probably time to ask for backup".

The guides "[Under Pressure: Understanding assessment anxiety—Resource for students](#)" and "[Mitigating Assessment Anxiety in First-Year University Students: A resource guide for teaching staff](#)," were funded by Ako Aotearoa, New Zealand's Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence.

More information: Under Pressure: Understanding assessment anxiety – Resource for students: [ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/und ... -assessment-](http://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/und...-assessment-)

[anxiety/](#)

Mitigating Assessment Anxiety in First-Year University Students: A resource guide for teaching staff: [ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/und...
university-students/](https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/understanding-university-students/)

Provided by University of Canterbury

Citation: Under pressure: How young people cope with anxiety (2019, September 18) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-09-pressure-young-people-cope-anxiety.html>

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