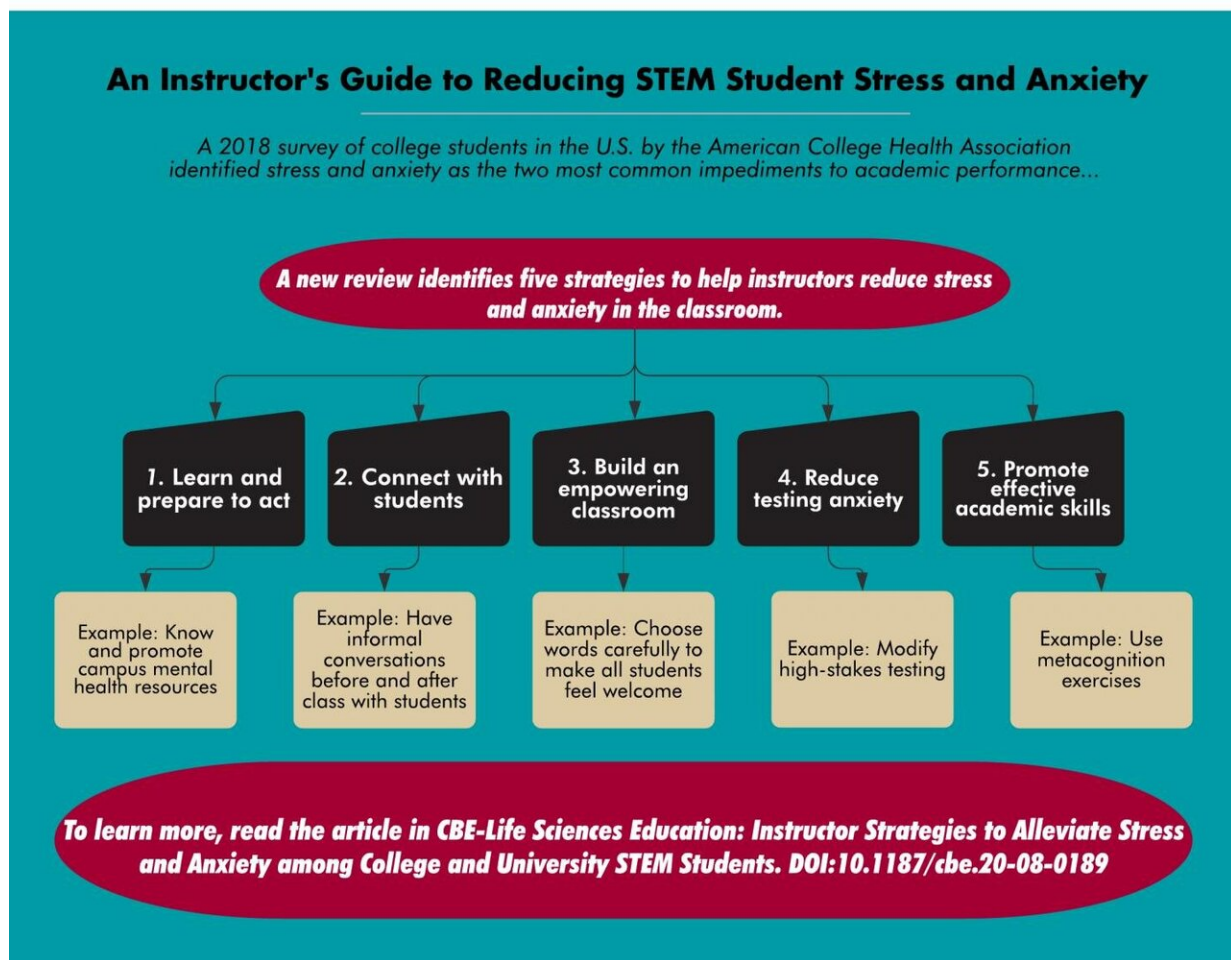


An instructor's guide to reducing college students' stress and anxiety

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A flowchart that identifies five strategies to help college and university instructors reduce stress and anxiety in the classroom. Credit: Chapman University

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, college students were reporting record levels of stress and anxiety. According to the American College Health Association Fall 2018 National College Health Assessment, 63% of U.S. college students experienced overwhelming anxiety throughout the year. Plus, stress can impact students' academic performance, and students with higher stress levels are more at-risk of withdrawing from college—often permanently. Given these complex mental health issues, all hands are needed on deck to support student success.

A new review from Chapman University's Schmid College of Science and Technology and Grand Challenges Initiative provides actionable and evidence-based strategies for instructors to help combat the ongoing epidemic of stress and [anxiety](#) among college and [university students](#), with a focus on students in STEM disciplines. The strategies can be implemented by new and experienced instructors in order to reduce student stress and anxiety and ultimately improve students' academic performance and quality of life. The role that higher education instructors can play in alleviating students' stress and anxiety has been largely underexplored in previous studies, in favor of proposals for broad programmatic approaches at the institutional level.

Led by Chapman professors Jeremy Hsu and Gregory Goldsmith, the review covers specific and highly practicable actions. From learning about the university's available campus mental health programs, to arriving a few minutes prior to the start of class to allow student check-ins and greetings, to sharing relevant personal stories, the approaches in the paper directly equip the instructors who see and interact with students on a daily basis to improve the classroom experience.

We asked the authors five questions about their new review, published this week in the journal *CBE—Life Sciences Education*.

1. What motivated you to review best practices for

reducing student stress and anxiety in the classroom?

We have always been concerned about stress and anxiety in our students and have seen how much the pandemic has exacerbated these issues. To address our concerns, we have looked for evidence-based practices to try to mitigate stress and anxiety in our classrooms and to best support our students. We wanted to bring together this research as a guide for instructors to highlight practical approaches to alleviating student stress and anxiety as they navigate these challenging circumstances.

2. You lay out a framework for instructors to alleviate stress and anxiety with five overarching approaches: learning and preparing to act; connecting with students; building an empowering classroom culture; reducing testing anxiety; and promoting effective academic skills. If you had to choose one for instructors to focus on, which would you choose and why?

Our review highlights that instructors can make a difference in alleviating student stress and anxiety through many types of interactions. For instance, it is important that instructors know and advertise the mental health resources and professional support that are available to students. Another approach involves the simple act of instructors taking a few minutes before each class to chat informally with students. Instructors can also reduce student stress and anxiety by changing the structure of their exams. Cumulatively, these small acts can add up to big improvements for students' performance in the classroom.

3. How do the approaches you identify intersect with

our renewed interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM?

One of the things that stood out to us was that classroom practices that are not sensitive to equity and inclusion can disproportionately increase stress and anxiety among certain identities. Sometimes, the words or actions that seem trivial to an instructor can increase stress among certain students, and this is likely to impact their ability to learn. For instance, instructors can sometimes make statements that make students question whether they belong in the classroom and this can be a source of stress. In turn, one can also imagine that this affects whether or not a student chooses to persist in a STEM major.

4. What can universities do to support instructors in their efforts to reduce stress and anxiety in the classroom?

We are always in favor of increasing the training and support for instructors, so that they are prepared to support their students. More fundamentally, we need to normalize conversations where we talk about stress and anxiety and how we can work together so that all of our students can thrive.

5. At the end of the paper, you identify a number of areas for future research. Were there any surprises?

We have known for a while that students consistently identify [stress](#) and anxiety as barriers to their success, so in some ways, the biggest surprise was that the research on [best practices](#) in the [classroom](#) is so limited. It is also not yet clear that what works in some disciplines, or for some [student](#) demographics, will work for others. There are clearly some very

exciting opportunities for experts in education and psychology to come together and provide important insights into how to improve outcomes for all of our students.

More information: Jeremy L. Hsu et al, Instructor Strategies to Alleviate Stress and Anxiety among College and University STEM Students, *CBE—Life Sciences Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1187/cbe.20-08-0189](https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.20-08-0189)

Provided by Chapman University

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