

Tips for Teaching Students with Anxiety

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Bottom line up front: Sending a message that you are a compassionate instructor who will take student mental health issues seriously means the world. Here are some ways to do that.

Communicate information about University support services.

Consider mentioning in your first lecture or seminar that Disability Support Services, Student Support & Well-being, and Counselling Services are all available to students who may be struggling with mental health issues. Many students may not identify anxiety as a disability, or even as a condition for which they can get help, especially if they're experiencing symptoms for the first time. It took me years (and many doctors) to realize that my intestinal problems were anxiety symptoms and not some sort of separate digestive issue. Moreover, the social stigma attached to the word "disability," not to mention mental health more generally, can prevent students from going to Disability Support Services. Sharing resources can help combat this stigma.

Prepare students for classroom activities.

Not knowing what's coming can be triggering for students' anxiety. Some things you might try:

- Tell students at the start of lecture or seminar if there will be interactive activities, group work, etc. and roughly when it will come in the session ("first we'll talk about this, then we'll do this activity...").
- Provide clear guidelines for group or pair work, and don't do it all the time—when I asked students with anxiety for tips, concern about group work was the most common thing they brought up.
- Consider a regular format for lectures or seminars, e.g., my lectures always have three sections and one of those is usually interactive.
- Give students a chance to write down their answer to a discussion question before sharing it with the class.

Set a classroom culture of empathy and understanding.

Many students with anxiety have been conditioned to expect that instructors will be dismissive of mental health concerns. Making reasonable accommodations is important, but fulfilling legal obligations does not automatically signal empathy. Some things you might try on the latter front:

- At the start of term, invite students to fill out a form with their concerns, triggers, goals, etc. This signals that you will take student well-being seriously. An example form of mine that you can poach:

¹ With thanks to many friends and colleagues, but especially to Kaden Paulson-Smith and Hanna Lichtenstein for their generous input.

<https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?subpage=design&FormId=7qe9Z4D970GskTWEGCkKHpWo9-G9G9FKr886Qftn-jpUN1RLMExTSUMwRVFGTTYwRTVIMUVUU0k3NS4u&Token=e0bfeae404a84c2e898301bcfc2c38ac>.

- Invite students in seminars to set expectations of that space together. This includes expectations of you, of themselves as individuals, and of each other collectively. This signals that you value students' input and will listen to their concerns if they approach you. Review these expectations with students at least once later in the term to make sure they're still working.
- Ask for informal feedback from students regularly. This can include asking students to share at the end of the session how they think it went, setting up an anonymous virtual comment box, having students do a reflective exercise halfway through the term, etc.

Make an explicit rule against cold-calling.

Cold-calling is a nightmare for students with anxiety, and the prospect of it can turn them off from coming to class. Even if *you* know you won't cold-call, students don't know that unless you tell them. Making a rule against cold-calling sets a clear expectation for students about classroom dynamics.

Scaffold assessments where you can.

Students with anxiety are likely to experience their worst symptoms around assessments, especially if those assessments are new or non-standard. Some things you might try:

- Talk about the assessment regularly, albeit briefly, in lectures or seminars so that it doesn't sneak up on students.
- Provide exemplars from past years (if available).
- Remind students that they can use office hours (including virtual office hours) to talk through ideas with you, but they are also welcome to chat with you via email if they're more comfortable with that. (Of course, if email makes *you* anxious, setting a clear boundary around this at the start of term can be okay too.)

Try not to guilt students for not participating in the way you'd hoped.

Students with anxiety can be some of the most engaged students in the room, but they may not participate in group discussions or other activities that trigger panic attacks. We don't mark participation in SPIR, but try not to shame a class as a whole for not answering questions, allege that they are unprepared, or threaten undesirable activities if they don't start speaking up. This can backfire and make students with anxiety (and all students) feel worse rather than empowered to participate. Incorporating non-oral ways of participating, such as written reflective activities, can be helpful.

Acknowledge, to yourself, your own limitations.

You don't need to dwell on this with students, but noting that there are things outside of your control is important for identifying the things you *can* control. For instance, many students with anxiety would benefit from smaller class sizes, but there is nothing you can do about this. Focus on what you are able to address.