Academic Anxiety

CORI HILL, LPC
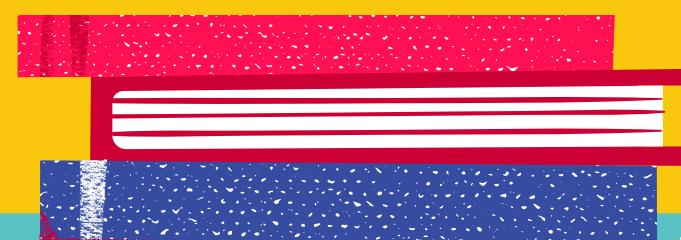
Learning Objectives
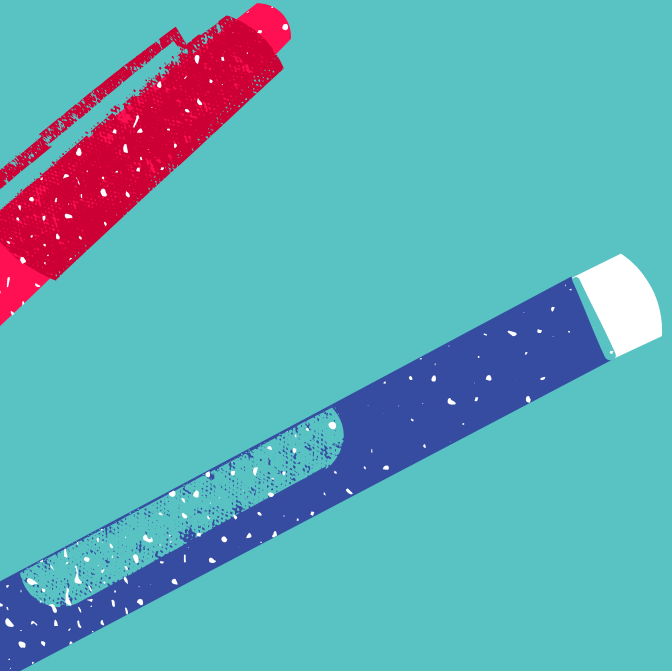
- Be able to identify academic anxiety from a student perspective as well as its incidence on the SMU campus and nationally. Be able to recognize potential signs of academic anxiety.

- Understand how significant life stressors and world events may exacerbate academic anxiety and performance, and how to address and account for such occurrences as faculty.

- Implement new strategies for integrating knowledge in course format, classroom expectations, and general pedagogy.

What exactly is academic anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural physiological, psychological, and behavioral response to stress.

When this occurs in response to a school-related demand, it is called academic anxiety.

Not all instances of academic anxiety are severe enough to meet criteria for a mental health diagnosis.

Components of Academic Anxiety

Worry

Emotionality

Task-generated interference

Study Skills Deficits

Procrastination

Recognizing Academic Anxiety

Below are a few indications that a student <u>may</u> be experiencing academic anxiety.

- A student who avoids enrolling in specific classes out of fear
- A student who does not speak up often in class
- A student who seems overly concerned about school, assignments, or tests
- A student who procrastinates on assignments or studying, often due to feeling overwhelmed
- A student who is often sick or reports experiencing elevated heart rate, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, or muscle tension when thinking of school
- A student who frequently misses classes
- A student who seems to over-communicate

*Some of these may also indicate a student is not feeling challenged enough.

Other Factors

Factors that impact academic anxiety:

Several other factors can exacerbate or mitigate a student's risk for experiencing academic anxiety:

- Nutrition
- Sleep
- Perfectionism
- Concurrent stressors and transitions
- Concurrent disorders and disabilities

A future presentation will focus specifically on how significant national or global events and systemic oppression may impair a student's academic performance.

The Data

# National Landscape of College Student Mental Health

Some studies show as many as 90% of college students experience stress that impacts their academic performance.

A 2018 study showed that 63% of college students felt overwhelming anxiety while only 23% of those students reported working with a mental health professional.

Studies show that anxiety spikes drastically for students first entering college.

The literature shows that mental health for college students has declined significantly in recent years, and that technology may be a factor.

Students at all levels of education continue to struggle as they adjust to learning in virtual environments.
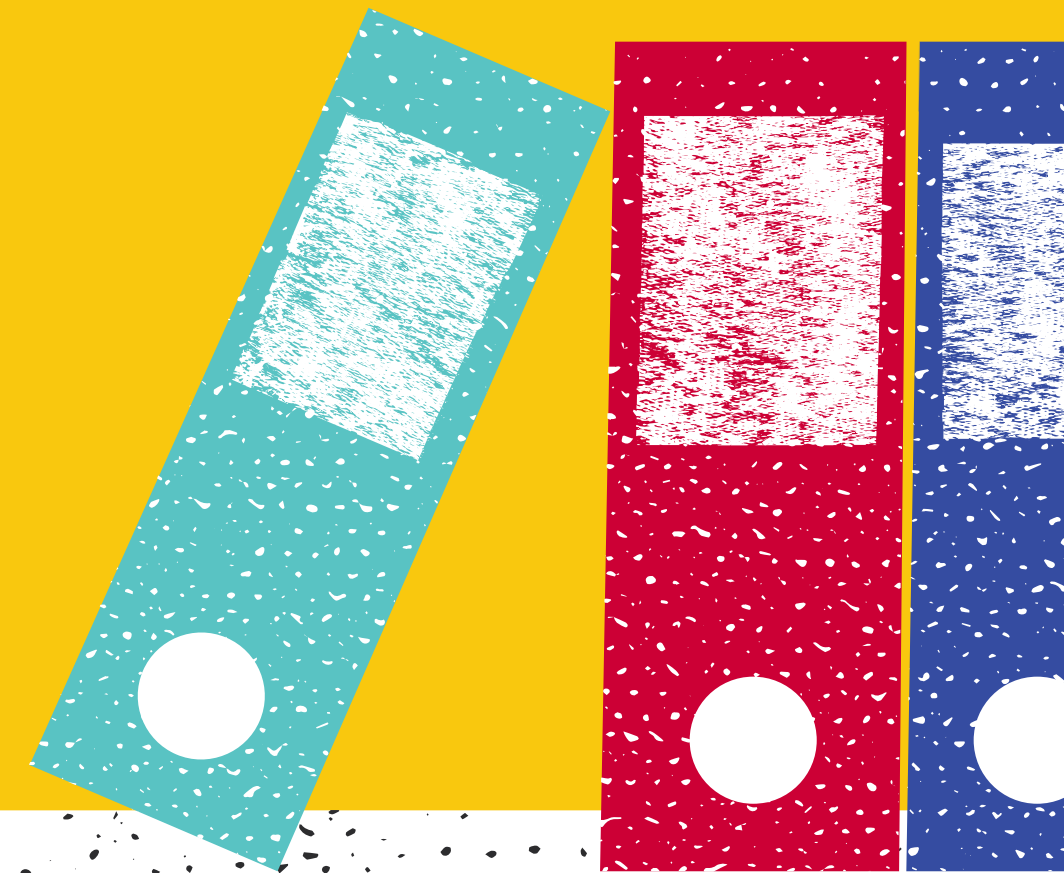
SMU Student Mental Health Trends

From June 1, 2020 to November 16, 2020, Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS) saw a 5% increase in total number of appointments compared to same time last year.

This modest increase is similar to what other college counseling centers experienced although all of us expected to see higher increases going into the fall semester.

SMU Student Mental Health Trends

Those students with preexisting conditions are finding that their symptoms are increasing in severity (i.e. those with anxiety disorders and depression often find it more difficult to self-motivate and/or focus in an academic environment).

Students presenting with high distress often describe themselves as 'drowning' or feeling overwhelmed. As the dialogue continues, they mention the loss of interactions with others and routines due to coursework format changes.

SMU Student Mental Health Trends

CAPS is hearing the language of grief and loss around:
- relational life
- expectations of what college life should be (or was)
- for some, cherished dreams of their first year or their senior year
- for graduate students, the loss of internships or expected job opportunities.

Students are also seeking support around:
- financial insecurities personally and/or with their families
- the day-to-day isolation and loneliness many feel.

Faculty Support

Student Resources

Faculty can remind students of these resources in the course syllabus and around the time of early and midterm grade reports and final exams.

Altshuler Learning Enhancement Center (A-LEC)

Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS)

Disability Accommodations and Success Strategies (DASS)
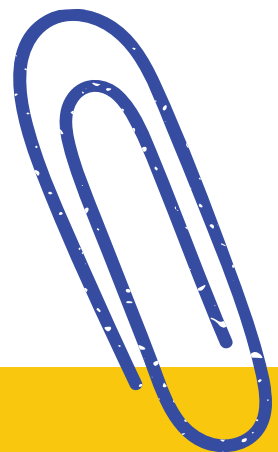
- Tutoring
- Writing Center
- Academic Counseling
- Success Strategies Workshops

- Personal Counseling
- Group Counseling & Workshops
- Psychiatric Services
- Substance Abuse & Recovery Services

- Accommodations Application Review
- Resources for ADHD and learning disabilities
- Academic Counseling

How Faculty Can Support:

Faculty are not responsible for assessing or managing the student's anxiety but instead for:

1. Helping them connect with resources that can help them learn how to manage it

2. Creating classrooms and course formats and expectations that account for the experience of students with academic anxiety

- Set accessible Office Hours
- Remind students about campus resources (A-LEC, CAPS, DASS)
- Emphasize learning over achievement
- Consider how feedback is delivered
- Commit to transparent and timely grading
- Invite students to provide feedback
- Create a culture of compassion and accountability
- Design your courses and syllabi to align with the "10 Pedagogical Tips to Reduce Student Anxiety" developed by the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE)
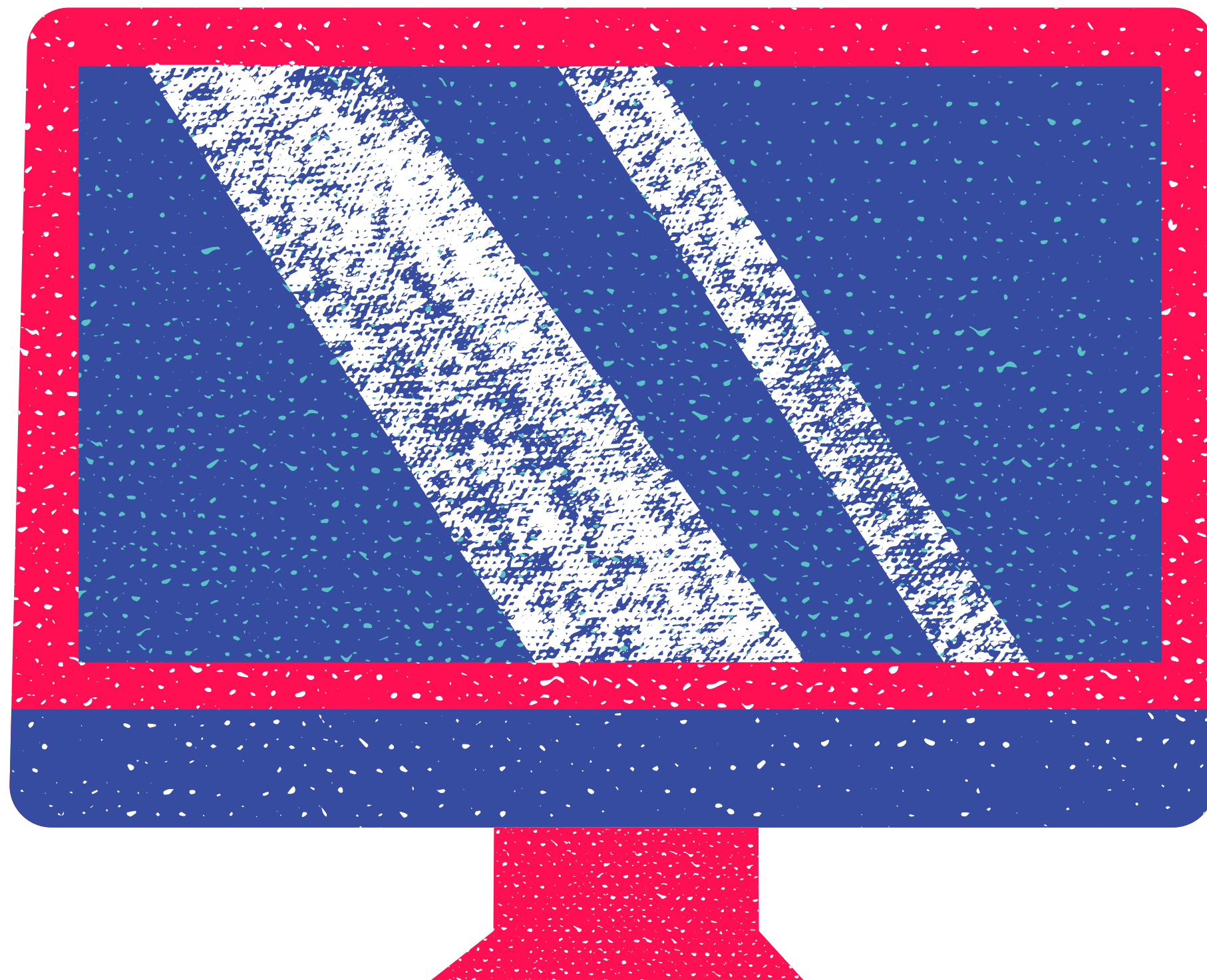
A Final Note

We learned through conversations with our students that they tend to ignore *most* email communication from SMU--aside from emails from their faculty.

Your messaging matters, and may be most effective mechanism for getting a student connected with helpful resources.

Sources

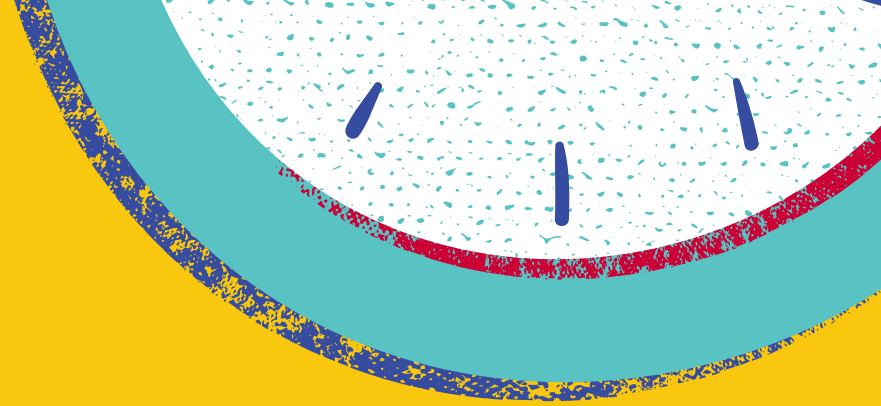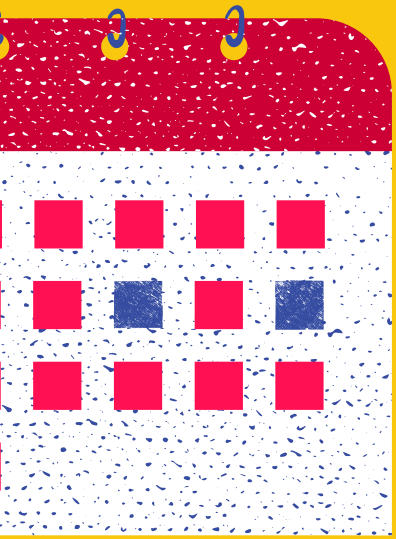*10 Pedagogical Tips to Reduce Student Anxiety.* SMU Center for Teaching Excellence.

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Thank You!