Addressing Student Anxiety

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), “Everyone experiences stress and anxiety at one time or another. The difference between them is that stress is a response to a threat in a situation. Anxiety is a reaction to the stress.” (Stress | Anxiety and Depression Association of America – ADAA, 2019, para. 1)

In our experience, nursing students are dealing with many stressors, both within and outside the program. Stress is a normal and expected part of life and most students are able to cope with it. However, when students develop anxiety in response to the stress, it can become problematic. The topic of stress and anxiety is a vast and complex one. For the purposes of PASS, our focus is on anxiety related to test-taking. According to the above definition, test-taking is the *stress* and *anxiety* is the reaction to that stress.

We have found that anxiety plays a major role in students’ test-taking performance. Although most students are able to cope with it, some are not. When anxiety interferes with the student’s performance, it is time for us to intervene. We have seen this repeatedly when a student is able to:

* function well in the clinical setting
* demonstrate their knowledge in discussion with the teacher
* complete clinical assignments

yet, when faced with a test, becomes overwhelmed with anxiety and is unable to convey their knowledge.

Here are some examples of what students have told us about their experience with anxiety:

*I don’t know what to do. I study for days and feel prepared, then I get to the test and I blank out.*

*It starts about two days before the test. I get panicky, I can’t sleep and it becomes harder to focus. By the morning of the test, I’ve lost all my confidence and just know I’m going to fail.*

*For the last test I got up in the morning feeling sick to my stomach. I tried taking Gravol and by the time I got to the test I felt so dizzy I couldn’t really concentrate. So I won’t do that again, but what* am *I going to do?*

If you are using PASS in a **One-on-One** or **Small Group** context, you are working with students who are failing or at risk of failing. This increases the likelihood that you will be dealing with students who are experiencing anxiety. It is one of the reasons why, on the Student Profilewe ask students to rate their level of anxiety when writing nursing tests. This opens the door to addressing the student’s perception of how anxiety is affecting them.

**When** do we intervene in terms of anxiety?

We intervene when we think, or the student tells us, that their anxiety is affecting their test performance.

**How** do we intervene?

We believe that, for students with mild anxiety, the strategies presented in the Bank of Strategies for Success can indirectly help to decrease the anxiety. For example, developing a strong knowledge base and preparing well for a test should help lessen the anxiety.

In addition, we have included a short list of strategies to help decrease anxiety. We have chosen to focus on:

* fostering a healthy lifestyle
* developing coping strategies

However, when you believe that the student’s anxiety level is more than you can handle in your role as a nursing teacher, it is time to refer the student. The anxiety experienced by some students is outside the realm of our expertise and the student will be better served by meeting with the appropriate professional.

Here are some strategies that we recommend to students.

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| Focus: Fostering a healthy lifestyle |
| **Strategies** | **Related discussion points, as applicable**  |
| Eat well | * Eat nutritious food (vs. junk food)
* Eat when you are hungry (vs. bingeing)
* Eat lots of vegetables and fruits

Limit foods and beverages that are high in sugar  |
| Sleep well | * Try to follow a sleep schedule
* Develop your own bedtime ritual
* Sleep in a darkened room

Limit late-night screen time |
| Exercise regularly | * The Government of Canada recommends 2.5 hours per week of physical activity <https://csepguidelines.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2018/03/CSEP_PAGuidelines_adults_en.pdf>
* Get some fresh air every day
* Use everyday activities to meet fitness goals; for example, take the stairs instead of the elevator
* Choose a physical activity that you enjoy (you will be more likely to stick with it)

Limit the amount of time that you are inactive  |
| Develop a school/life balance | * Learn to prioritize the demands on your time (family, school, work and social obligations)
* Recognize when to ask for help
* Set boundaries; learn to say “no”
* Make time for yourself

Be flexible; there is no perfect balance |
| Focus: Developing coping strategies |
| **Strategies** | **Related discussion points, as applicable**  |
| Practise deep breathing techniques | * Learn the technique of deep breathing so that it will work when you need it
* Take several deep breaths, in and out, concentrating on each breath and emptying your mind. This takes practice!
* Repeat as needed until you feel calm

Consider mindfulness meditation |
| Identify your go-to support person | Talking it out with a person you trust can help relieve feelings of anxiety |
| Use positive self-talk | * Exchange your negative thoughts for positive ones:
* “I’m going to fail the test” becomes “I’m working hard to pass the test”
* “I’ll never get all this studying done in time” becomes “I’m doing my best to cover the most important topics”
* “I can’t do it” becomes “I can do it”

Focus on something that is going right in your life |
| Find something that makes you laugh | Laughing distracts you and may release endorphins (“feel good” chemicals) |
| Learn to be kind to yourself | * Recognize your strengths
* Be patient with yourself; if you fail a test, learn from it and move on

Forgive yourself: accept your flaws – no one is perfect!  |