

## What Is Academic Anxiety?

Every student feels stress and anxiety in school at one time or another. This stress might come from having to give a speech or presentation in front of class, or maybe a performance in front of the whole school. Perhaps you feel worried every time you enter a very strict teacher's classroom. Maybe in the past you have felt stressed out while trying to complete an assignment in a subject that isn't your strongest area. Having anxiety means feeling stressed out, whether it's because you have a lot on your plate or because you worry that what is on your plate is done well. The experience of feeling under pressure at school is not all that uncommon. School is where you learn new skills, and the main way in which teachers judge how well you're learning and practicing these skills is by assigning homework, reports, and presentations, and by giving tests and quizzes. As if they were not bad enough, all of these measurements of your new skills and academic abilities are timed. Trying to remember math equations, new Spanish vocabulary, or the formula of gravity during a twenty-minute quiz can rattle even the most relaxed person.

The feeling of being distressed, fearful, or stressed out as a result of school pressures is called academic anxiety. Academic anxiety is experienced most often during timed exercises and in situations in which students are expected to perform their best when the stakes are very high, such as on the Scholastic Assessment Tests (SATs), or when in front of others. The way in which someone experiences this anxiety can range from mild, momentary jitters at having to read out loud in class, to a serious disorder in which a person experiences overwhelming panic and has difficulty functioning normally.

## Healthy Stress



In order to understand the range of slight to severe academic anxiety, let's look closer at the different reactions to academic pressures. First, the healthy, or slight, kind: believe it or not, the normal feelings of stress students experience because of tests, quizzes, and assignments can actually make them perform better. How? When a person feels stress, the amygdala, an almond-shaped part of the brain that controls fear and aggression, sends the signal to the body to release epinephrine, or adrenaline, which makes the heart beat faster and blood flow even quicker to the internal organs. Dopamine, the chemical that makes humans feel pain, is also reduced. Called the fight-or-flight response, this surge of chemicals makes the senses sharper and makes the body respond more quickly to danger while making it less apt to feel pain. People can see, hear, or even taste more clearly while they have more adrenaline coursing through their system. This response was probably what kept humans alive when they were battling it out for survival thousands of years ago against other animals, and it continues to keep us safe from danger.

While science tests aren't dangerous in the way that outrunning a lion is, taking tests is still stressful, and the act of taking the test produces the same chemical response in the body to fight the stress of the moment. The fight-or-flight response is simply present so people perform at the top of their game during the stressful period. The chemicals stop flowing as soon as the stressful situation is over. In healthy doses, anxiety about doing well is what makes you study for tests and complete your assignments on time. Stress, a less healthy cousin of worry, is also something that every student experiences from time to time because of schoolwork or major tests. Stress can also motivate you to do better if it's a very temporary experience and doesn't linger.

## **Unhealthy Stress**

Second, there is the unhealthy, or severe, reaction to academic pressures: the mind can seize up and overreact to school pressures and cause a bodily reaction that knocks someone over like a tidal wave, making him or her perform horribly. The second type of physical reaction is the same as the more mild kind, except that the abnormal response causes the fight-or-flight impulse to keep going when the situation is over. In the unhealthy reaction, it's the overly worried, out-of-control brain that keeps sending signals to the body to keep chemicals circulating through the system, tricking the body into thinking that it's still in danger. The unhealthy reaction is considered a disorder because it knocks the normal order of physical response into a mess, or disarray. In a disorder, the emotional and physical anxious feeling stays with someone even though the stressful situation is no longer taking place, and other unhealthy behaviors begin.

## **Academic Anxiety and Cheating**

Today cheating is a common part of high school academics. While there was once a stigma attached to cheating, most high school students today don't feel the same shame or embarrassment about cheating as earlier generations.

Seventy-five percent of high school students say they have cheated, according to a 2005 Duke University study. If you include copying another person's homework in the definition of cheating, 90 percent of high school students admit to cheating.

And it's usually not the students who are struggling to earn good grades who cheat. Instead, it's most often the high achievers who can get top grades without cheating.

Eighty percent of honors and AP students cheat on a regular basis, says Denise Pope, founder and director of Stanford's SOS: Stressed-Out Students Project. These students say they have the most to lose. And faced with the pressure to achieve, they feel like they have no other option but to cheat.

## **Anxiety Disorders**

An anxiety disorder is a disturbance in normal mental health function that has specific triggers, or causes. According to the National Institute of Mental Health ([www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)), it affects as many as one in ten young people. If you experience severe anxiety, you are not alone in your age group.

## **Common Anxiety Disorders**

Now that we're talking about serious cases of academic anxiety, it's important to look at the relationship between academic anxiety and anxiety disorders. While there is no anxiety disorder named "academic anxiety disorder," there are some anxiety disorders that can flare up or become worse because of academic pressures. Let's look at what characterizes some other anxiety disorders to get a clear picture of what an academic anxiety-related disorder might look like. Here are some types of disorders that typically affect teenagers:

### **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is a serious anxiety problem. Someone with GAD feels afraid and worried all of the time, even when there is nothing to be afraid of or worried about. People with GAD tend to believe that some disaster is about to happen. Even if they realize that their constant worrying is not necessary or helpful, the fear does not go away. They can't relax. They may have trouble sleeping. Someone with GAD is unable to concentrate and is unable to focus enough to study for an exam. He or she might worry and worry about something happening to a relative who isn't even sick. People suffering from GAD can always find something to worry about. People with GAD may experience some or all of the common effects of anxiety but much more intensely and more often than the average person.

### **Panic Disorder**

Some people have panic attacks, which are unexpected and sudden attacks, so often that they live in constant fear of the next attack. Repeat sufferers may be afraid to return to places where they have had panic attacks, or they may avoid certain social situations because they fear the embarrassment of being seen by others while having an attack. Some never leave their homes at all. Many doctors and psychiatrists would diagnose these people with a condition known as panic disorder. Panic disorder—frequent, uncontrollable panic attacks—resembles so many other medical conditions that its sufferers are often incorrectly diagnosed.

### **Social Anxiety Disorder**

A common anxiety disorder among teens is social anxiety disorder, or social phobia, the fear of being embarrassed by a social situation. The problem with being a teen is that social phobia is not exactly an unusual fear, and so unless it persists for six months and interferes with someone going to school, work, or out with his or her friends, doctors are reluctant to diagnose it. Sometimes teens who develop social phobia were shy as children. It really is pretty normal to be self-conscious as a teen (bad skin days, bad hair days, getting changed for gym when you've just put on some pounds), but people suffering from social anxiety disorder may blush, get the

shakes, and feel nauseated when they have to answer a question in class, and they worry about it all the time. Or they may be fine in class and terrified in the lunchroom.

### **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is another anxiety disorder, one that sometimes sounds funny, although not to the people who suffer from it. People with OCD are troubled by persistent, upsetting thoughts (obsessions). A common one is the fear of dirt or germs. They deal with this by developing rituals (compulsions), with which they try to control the fear. Someone who has OCD and suffers from the fear of contamination might wash his or her hands so many times a day that the hands become inflamed and even bleed, and yet the idea of stopping fills him or her with terror.

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

Some teens suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is the modern term for what, years ago, used to be called “shell shock” when it was first diagnosed among soldiers who had survived bombings and other attacks. Now doctors recognize that any traumatic situation that involves great physical harm or the threat of great physical harm can trigger it. When people find themselves in situations in which they feel helpless, fearful, horrified, or life-threatened, it can lead to this disorder. A teen who has been mugged or raped, or has experienced or witnessed great violence (for instance the physical abuse of a parent or sibling) may suffer from flashbacks to this event. So may the survivor of a plane or car crash. He or she finds it impossible to feel that the event is truly in the past. Some people exhibit PTSD symptoms even when they were not directly involved in a traumatic situation, but they were there just as a witness.

Some common symptoms are nightmares or flashbacks of the event, avoidance of certain places or people who are associated with the event, emotional detachment from others, or jumpiness. When the symptoms of PTSD show varies. For some people, they exhibit symptoms soon after the traumatic event. In others, the signs might take a year to develop, or a specific event, such as an anniversary, might trigger the symptoms to show up.

### **Agoraphobia**

**People with agoraphobia are afraid of panic, and agoraphobia goes hand in hand with anxiety and panic attacks.**

Agoraphobia literally means “fear of the marketplace.” Many people think of it as a fear of open spaces or a fear of going outside of one’s home. Actually, this phobia is much more complicated than that. People with agoraphobia are afraid of panic, and

agoraphobia goes hand in hand with anxiety and panic attacks. In fact, the term “agoraphobia” is sometimes used interchangeably with “anticipatory anxiety.” People with agoraphobia will avoid any place or situation that they associate with panicky feelings. The place may be a public area, such as a shopping mall, or a room in one’s home. Most agoraphobics have a “safe zone”—a place where they feel protected from anxiety and panic. Leaving the safe zone becomes a terrifying and painful thing to do. People with agoraphobia may also avoid situations that make them feel panicky, such as being alone, driving a car, or going to church. Some people with agoraphobia suffer from recurring panic attacks, whereas others deal with anxious feelings without attacks. Some may be too afraid to ever leave their homes. Others may struggle through jobs and busy social lives, always trying to hide the terror they feel inside.

### **The Link Between Academic Pressures and Anxiety Disorders**

Of the common anxiety disorders that teens experience, academic pressures might contribute to a general anxiety disorder, panic disorder, agoraphobia, or even social anxiety disorder if left untreated. The good news is that academic anxiety is readily treatable before it becomes a full-blown disorder. It is always important to know yourself and acknowledge how you are feeling. If you experience anxiety about schoolwork, tests, or presentations that won’t go away, or if you experience any of the symptoms listed in the descriptions of the disorders, talk to an adult who will listen to your thoughts and feelings and help you find the help that you need from a trained mental health professional, counselor, psychiatrist, or psychologist.

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