What factors increase the risk for stress and anxiety?

Adverse life events are a common risk factor for stress and anxiety among college students. These range from combat duty and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to sexual assault.

Between 55% and 69% of students have experienced at least one adverse event prior to entering college.

Racial and ethnic identity is also a risk factor. At Cal Poly SLO, minority groups comprise less than half of the student population. Minority students might experience more stress because of their perceived invisibility both on and off campus, and due to racial tensions.

Feeling a lack of belonging may increase stress and anxiety. International students further face the stress of acculturation, or the process of adapting to a host culture. Subliminal racism and language barriers also contribute to stress.

How can stress and anxiety affect your health?

Stress and anxiety can increase the likelihood of depression and may lead to reduced help-seeking behavior.

They correlate with lower exercise consistency and increased drug use. Poor health habits can in turn increase the risk of chronic diseases, such as liver cancer, coronary heart disease, and lung cancer.

Stress and anxiety endanger self-esteem and self-efficacy. The transition from high school to college is particularly associated with impaired self-confidence. Lower self-esteem can in turn impact students' abilities to make good decisions about school and work.

What else can excess stress and anxiety lead to?

Long-term effects also include negative life outcomes such as academic underachievement and drug dependence. Stress specifically about work is also linked with reduced academic success.

Stress and anxiety can impact multiple areas of your life and, if unaddressed, may increase the likelihood of negative life outcomes.
What interventions have proven to be effective?

Mindfulness practices generally help reduce stress and anxiety in college students. Just 4 sessions of mindfulness meditation can reduce anxiety and help you adapt better to stress. Mindfulness-centered hatha yoga can reduce stress and anxiety in just 3 sessions. Even online mindfulness programs can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression for up to 6 months!

Just ONE 90-minute Bikram yoga session can lower anxiety and perceived stress. Yoga can decrease anxiety in students even the day after, even if there’s an exam! It can be accompanied by feelings of relaxation, improved concentration, self confidence, efficiency, attentiveness, and less irritability.

Vigorous exercise is linked with lower levels of stress and can protect against mental health problems when you’re under a lot of stress. Most students who take exercise classes believe that they help both forget about stressors and cope with them.

Increases in “non-judging” behavior following mindfulness practices – allowing yourself to think and feel without criticizing yourself – might explain these lower levels of stress and anxiety.

What are the benefits of conducting interventions in academic settings?

Interventions implemented at schools and universities are incredibly beneficial to students. They give faculty and health professionals the chance to help students in a timely and effective manner, while avoiding the barriers that might keep students from using outside mental health services.

Finally, the stigma around mental health is reduced when it is addressed in an academic setting.

What can you do?

- Find the self-care practices that work for you, and use them!
- Make time for mindfulness, yoga, and/or general exercise when possible.
- Recognize that everyone deals with stress and anxiety to some degree. You are not alone.
- Seek help when you need it.

Resources:
- Headspace (app)
- Calm (app)
- Mindful in Minutes (podcast)
- Guided meditations (Youtube search)
- Youper (app)
- Insight Timer (app)
- Happify.com


