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Aalto-yliopisto

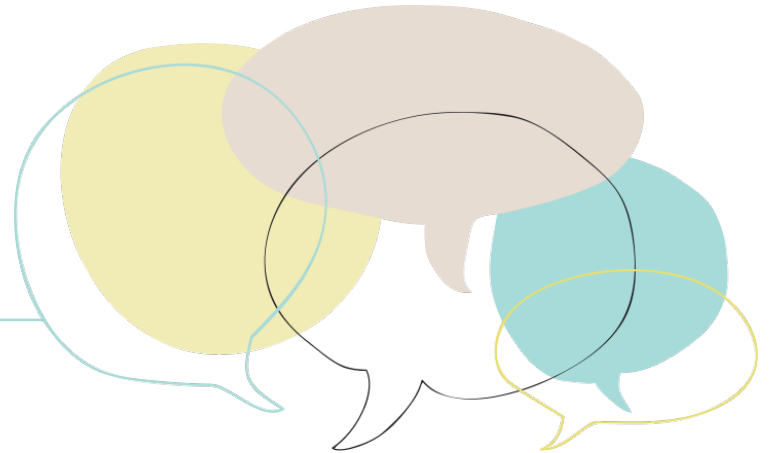


Assistant training

*Aalto University Learning Services
Sanni Saarimäki, study psychologist*

Topics

- **Learning difficulties**
- **Mental health**
- **Anxiety**

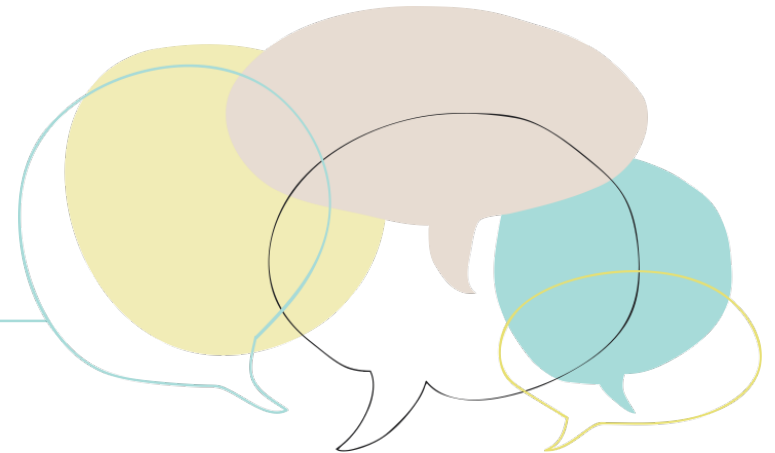




Learning difficulties

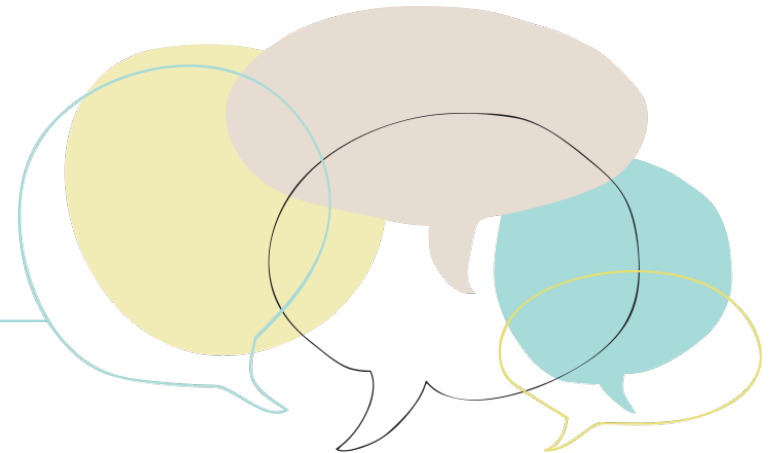
Question

- **Have you met a student who has some sort of learning difficulty?**
- **Have you otherwise encountered learning difficulties?**



Typical learning difficulties among university students

- Reading disorder - dyslexia
- Autism spectrum disorders (Asperger)
- ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder



Reading disorder - dyslexia

- Words or letters become mixed easily
- Reading takes more time and effort
- It might be more difficult to remember new things only through reading text
- It does not affect cognitive capacity
- Dyslexia rate in Finland about: 6-10% adults (www.lukihäiriö.fi, 9.10.2019)



Autism spectrum (Asperger)

- **Abnormal functioning of the nervous system**
- **Difficulties in planning, executing and stopping an action**
- **Difficulties in perceiving relations between big picture and details (central coherence)**
- **Hard to interpret other people's communication**
- **Facial expressions and gestures inappropriate in the situation**
- **May be mathematically gifted / may have specific interests**



ADHD and ADD

- difficult to concentrate

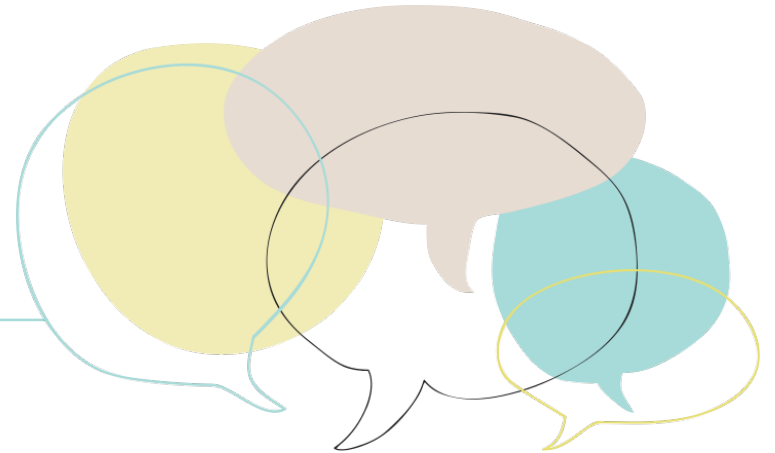
ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

- Inattention, hyperactivity, impulse

ADD

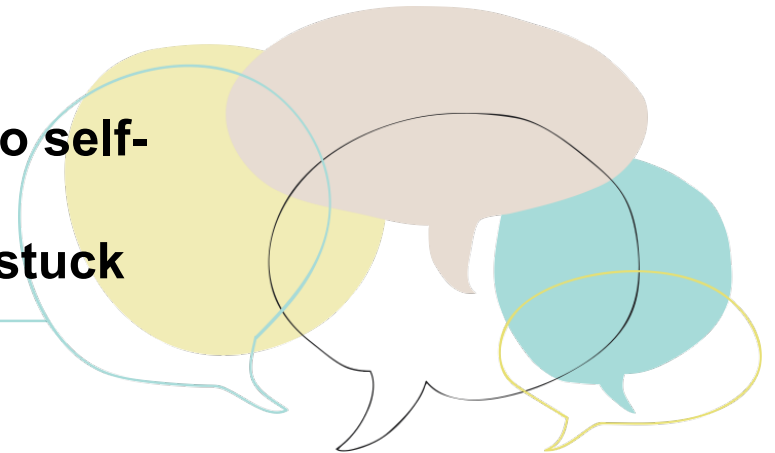
- Inattention disorder

- About 7 % of Finns



How are difficulties manifested?

- **Conduct problems**
- **Difficulties in adjusting to new situations**
- **Difficulties in mastering social situations**
- **Communication problems**
- **Problems with attention and focusing**
- **Problems with executive functions**
- **Time management**
- **Figuring out future plans**
- **Increasing self-knowledge and ability to self-regulate**
- **Difficulties in making choices, getting stuck**



How to help in the class room?

- Speak clearly and cover one topic at time
- Tell at first the structure or main points of the session
- Materials in advance if possible
- Minimize external distractions e.g. noise
- Clear instructions
- One (sub)task at time
- Keep some breaks
- Tell about all kind of changes (e.g change of schedules or rooms) well in advance
- Possibility to choose own method of studying (e.g. in groups, in pairs, on their own)



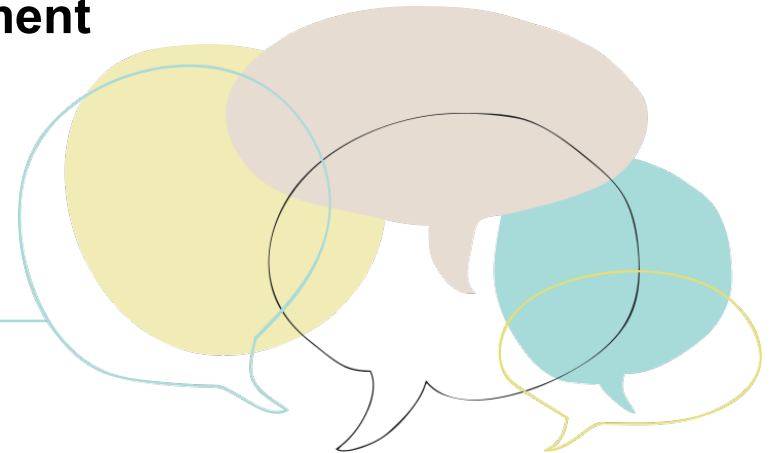
Supporting executive functions – *beneficial to everybody*

Clear and structured instructions

- Same instructions in different places
- Instructions divided into smaller pieces
- Monitoring performance and intervening early on in case of problems

Support and guidance with time management

- Setting goals
- Dividing goals into concrete tasks
- Using a calendar
- Monitoring goal achievement



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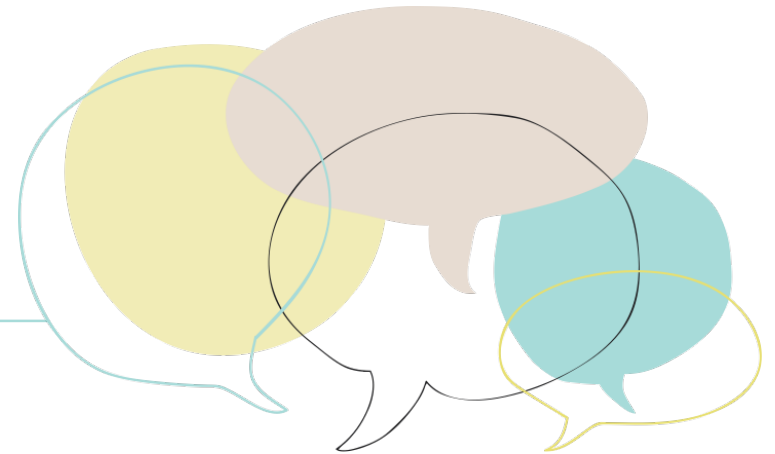
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Mental health problems

The background features three overlapping speech bubbles. The top-left bubble is white with a yellow outline. The top-right bubble is beige with a black outline. The bottom-right bubble is light blue with a white outline. The text 'Mental health problems' is overlaid on the white and beige bubbles.

Question

- **Imagine that after the first lesson there is a shy person who is waiting for everybody else to leave the classroom. Then she mumbles that she suffers from panic disorder and sometimes she feels very uncomfortable in the class room.**
- **What would you do?**



Mental health problems are the biggest health issue among students (FSHS)

- Students who have problems with mental health *need special care*.
- They are often gifted and get by, but their ability to study is *temporarily* compromised.
- Typical problems: depression, anxiety, panic disorder, eating disorders, addiction problems, bipolar disorder, personality disorders, crisis and traumas, sleeping problems

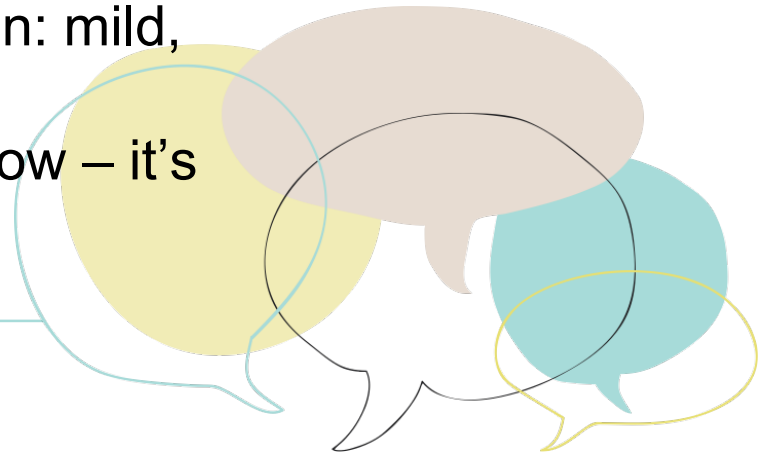
(FSHS = Finnish Student Health Service)



Depression - What's going on?

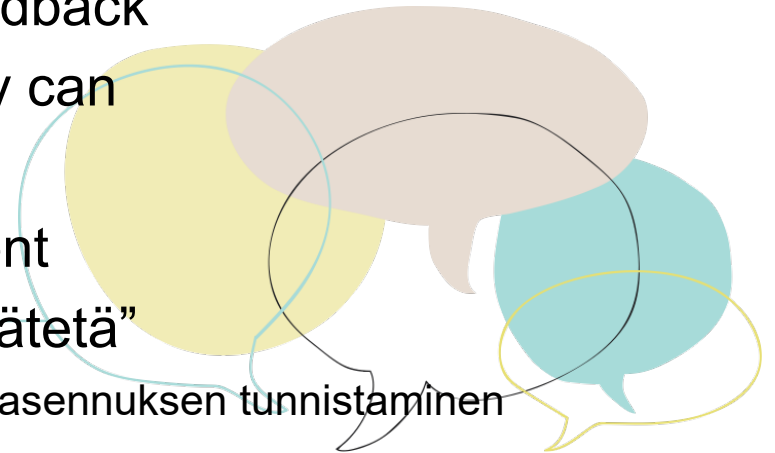
Main symptoms:

- Depressed mood
- Inability to feel interested in things or to feel pleasure
- Inability to enjoy life
- Strengthlessness, feeling tired, being less active
- There are different levels of depression: mild, moderate and severe
- In severe depression performance is low – it's hard to get out of bed



How can I support a depressed student?

- Confidential, open, safe and more easygoing atmosphere
- Encountering students individually
- Encouraging and supporting students
- Being available, listening and supporting
- Unambiguity and predictability of teaching
- Positive, constructive and realistic feedback
- Emphasizing what the student already can
- Student-teacher cooperation
- Encouraging to support a fellow student
- “No man is left behind” = ”Kaveria-ei-jätetä”



Stress related anxiety, exhaustion

What is it?

- Prolonged stress or significant life changes can cause anxiety symptoms
- Prolonged study-related stress can lead into a burnout in studies
- Fatigue, cynicism, feeling of inadequacy



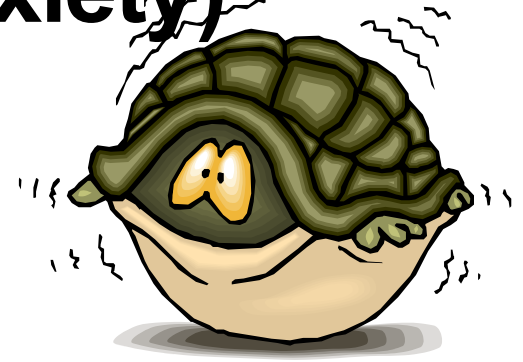
Stress related anxiety, exhaustion - How can we help?

- Goals and demands must be in right proportion to student's strengths and to the support available
 - Supporting the development of studying skills
 - Guidance, conversation about goals
- Schedule that enables sufficient recovery (breaks, free days)
- Temporarily slower study pace



Anxiety (stage fright, test anxiety)

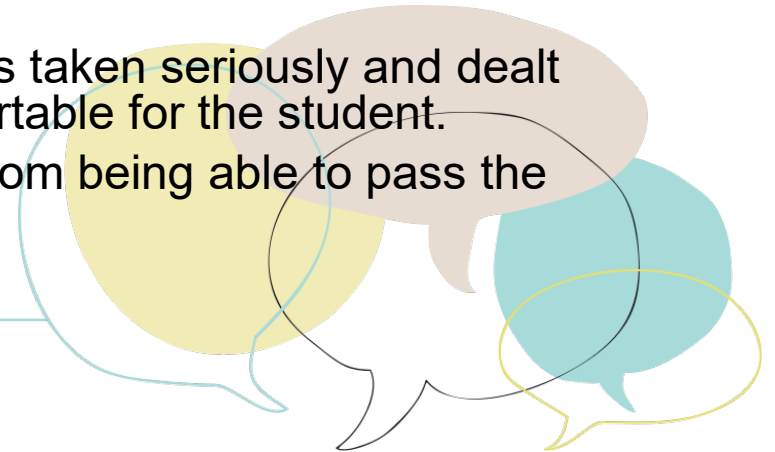
- Anxiety usually is a worry about future events / fear is a reaction to current events.
- These feelings may cause physical symptoms, such as a fast heart rate and shakiness.
- In studying anxiety is typically related to writing, exams or other evaluation situations.
- Anxiety may paralyze ability to function so that a student is not capable of achieving goals or is underachieving.



Anxiety – how can we help?

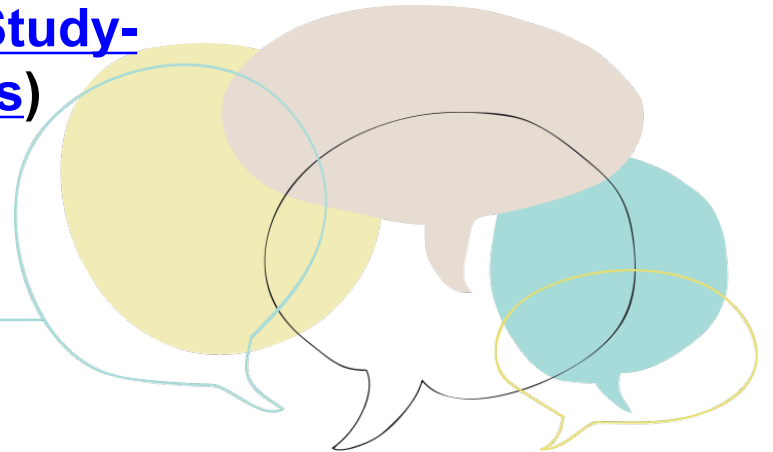
- Encouragement
- Can a presentation be held in a smaller group, only to the teacher or can it be recorded for the teacher?
- Do group work methods and performing together help?
- Does the student have a suggestion how he/she would like to complete the course?
- A student can bring up anxiety him-/herself. They might come and say that they're not able to participate in a class because there's presentations
- The most important thing is that the matter is taken seriously and dealt with confidentially in a manner that is comfortable for the student.
- Someone who is anxious does not benefit from being able to pass the course with less work than others.

Source: [Esok.fi](https://www.esok.fi/), korkeakouluopiskelijan jännittäminen



If you get worried about a student

- **You can bring it up with the student**
 - *By asking "how are you?"*
 - *By bringing up your observations about the student's behaviour, e.g. "I've noticed that you've been absent for a long time", "I got worried when you said..."*
- **You can always contact psychologists at Aalto**
(<https://into.aalto.fi/display/enopisk/Study-and-career-planning-psychologists>)



But what if it's a member of staff who has anxiety symptoms?

- **Acceptance**
- **Feeling anxious is very common phenomenon**
You don't have to hide it
- **Nobody has to be perfect**
- **Concentrate on succeeding**
- **Try to learn how to accept yourself as you are. –**
Be kind to yourself

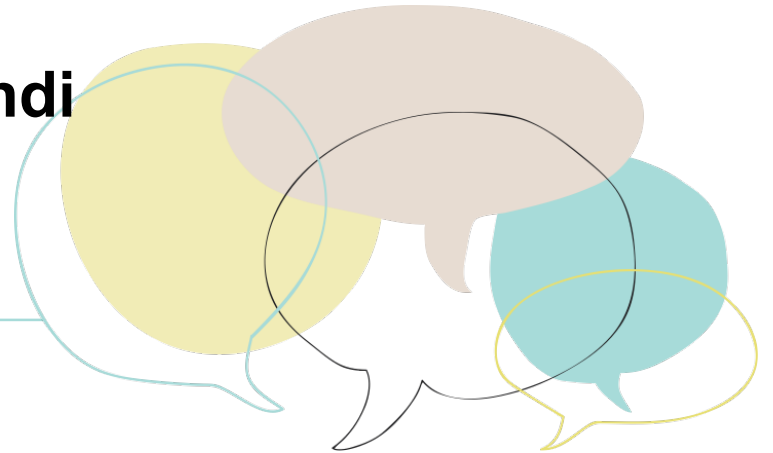


Individual study arrangements

Each Aalto student has a right to individual study arrangements due to an impairment restricting his/her ability to study or other health condition.

Read more:

<https://www.aalto.fi/en/services/individual-study-arrangements>



Aalto Psychologist's Services

Individual meetings

- Topics e.g. motivation, study skills, self-regulation, stress control, well-being and study ability
- Requests for appointments via email: opintopsykologi@aalto.fi
- 1-5 meetings (45 min), free of charge
- Confidential

Workshops

- Small groups, 3-8 sessions
- Themes e.g. Mindfulness, Power of imperfection

Study skills –website in Into

Self-study materials in MyCourses

