



Aalto University

Teaching assistant as a learning instructor

Aalto University Learning Services
Paula Sjöblom

Topics

- **Variation among students in university**
 - Learning difficulties
 - Mental health

- **Anxiety**
 - How to cope with anxiety

- **Relaxing exercise**

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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

- **Dyslexia - reading disorder**
- **Autism spectrum disorders**
- **ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder**

Dyslexia - reading disorder

- **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**

Autism spectrum

- **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**
- **Own, specific interests**

ADHD and ADD, 7 % of Finns

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

- Inattention
- Hyperactivity
- Impulse

- ADD
- Inattention disorder

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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Mental health problems

Question

Imagine that after the first lesson there is a shy girl 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?

According to FSHS mental health problems are the biggest health issue among students

- 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.
- According to FSHS one student in five has problems with mental health and one in ten needs immediate care.
(FSHS = Finnish Student Health Service)
- Typical problems: depression, anxiety, panic disorder, eating disorders, addiction problems, bipolar disorder, personality disorders, crisis and traumas, sleeping problems



Listening to the student always helps

- It's often more important to be heard than to have the problems solved:
Was I taken seriously? Does my teacher/instructor think that my problem is real?
- Bringing up the issue can sometimes be difficult: Anxiety can make it difficult for the student to express himself/herself, compassion and helping questions are needed
- Student often has in mind a suggestion for solving the problem
- "I want to be like others." "If I tell, will it be difficult to find a job later?"
- Many students still find it relieving that the issue was brought up.
- Students can always contact FSHS (YTHS) or study psychologist

Paula Pietilä, University of Turku

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

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
- Solving conflicts

http://www.terveyskirjasto.fi/terveyskirjasto/tk.koti?p_artikkeli=dlk00681

How depression disturbs studying

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.

Other symptoms

- Ability to focus and concentrate deteriorates.
- Self-esteem and self-worth diminish.
- Feelings of guilt and worthlessness
- Scarce and pessimistic view on future
- Self-destructive and suicidal thoughts
- Sleeping disorders
- Decreased appetite

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
- ”Kaveria-ei-jätetä”. “No man is left behind.”

Source: Hannu Lampi, 2012. Opiskelijan masennuksen tunnistaminen ja pedagoginen tukeminen Metropoliaassa.

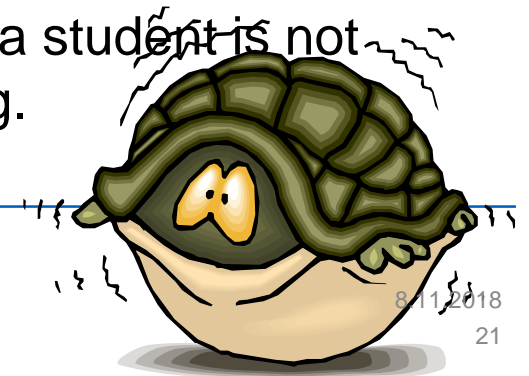
If you get worried about a student

- **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..."*
- **It is important to listen, you don't have to solve the problem**
- **You can always contact psychologists at Aalto (into.aalto.fi/opintopsykologi)**

Anxiety

Anxiety - What is it?

- 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.



Prevalence of anxiety

- **70% of Finns have performance anxiety at least sometimes**
- **30% of higher education students have performance anxiety. 10% of them feel so anxious that it has a negative effect on their studies**

(Lähde: YTHS)

Why do we have anxiety? 1/2

- **Personality traits**
- **Temperament: biologically and genetically determined trait that affects how we react in new situations**
- **30% of social anxiety can be explained by temperament traits**
- **Temperament does not determine how we behave, behaviour is learned**

Why do we have anxiety? 2/2

Environmental aspects related to anxiety:

- **Parenting and education: practices or attitudes that are very controlling, strict or humiliating**
- **Bullying (at school), humiliating in social situations**
- **Big life changes**

- *Denial of anxiety*

How can we help?

- Flexible evaluating methods: conversations, portfolio, learning diary, project work, exam based on study material, home exam, group exam, participants teaching each other
- Student may need help studying for an exam – recognizing weaknesses in reading or calculating techniques, guidance

Supporting a student suffering from test anxiety or stage fright

- 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.
- Being aware of acceptance, alternatives and support will get one further.”

(Esok.fi, korkeakouluopiskelijan jännittäminen)

Supporting a student suffering from test anxiety or stage fright

- Encouragement
- Video recordings of lectures, in evaluation: remote working or learning diaries.
- 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?
- Referral to anxiety group

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

Accept that you are feeling anxious

- **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**

Exercise

Don't think about an orange

Different ways to cope with anxiety

- **Preparation**
- **Breathing**
- **Keep moving (if it's possible)**
- **Find three object that you look at (it calms you down)**
- **Power sentence**
- **Power object**
- **Tense / release muscles**
- **Think about what really matters – e.g when speaking foreign language, the message is more important than perfect grammar**
- **Think about all the times you did great in past in similar situation**

Psychology Service

Psychology Service: Individual Meetings

The psychology service for students offers counseling and support for

- study skills and learning
- motivation
- self-regulation, e.g. time management
- coping with stress
- 1-5 appointments (45 minutes each)



Psychology Service: Workshops

- We offer workshops on different themes, eg. self-knowledge, social anxiety, mindfulness
- Usually 3-8 sessions per workshop
- Small groups, 10-15 participants
- You'll find more information on the services on the web site <https://into.aalto.fi/display/enopintopsykologi/Homepage> or into.aalto.fi/opintopsykologi

Relaxing exercise