University students and staff share experiences with anxiety, advice

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According to a report by the American College Health Association, around 76% of college students all over the country experienced some manner of anxiety during the spring 2019 semester.

Of that 76%, a little less than half reported their anxiety "negatively affected their academic performance."

A counselor from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Counseling and Testing Center commented on the nature of anxiety.

"We all have some level of anxiety. We're so biologically wired for that. We're going to make and choose what's safe for us in the environment." So, we all get nervous," Sara Trahan, a provisionally licensed professional counselor, said.

However, Trahan also differentiated between anxiety and a general feeling of nervousness.

"Now, clinical version of anxiety — any actual diagnosis — usually has an impact on your ability to function. So, whether that be school, work, social interactions, those kinds of things, that is more of a clinical diagnosis than somebody who's just worried in the moment, or really nervous in the moment," Trahan said.

"A lot of people outside of this field will use the term interchangeably, when they mean nervous or worried versus anxiety.

"Anxiety presents in many different ways in individuals, so there could be multiple symptoms," she said. "Long-term anxiety that is not treated, taken care of, or managed can have multiple symptoms, you know, and it ranges from stomach aches, shaky hands, short-term shallow breathing."

A few students shared their experiences living with anxiety. Kassandra Crissman, a junior in the animal science program at Louisiana State University, has been experiencing anxiety since she was around twelve years old.

She explains the beginning of her issues.

"Probably the horse showing," Crissman, an avid horseback rider, said. "And probably moving here from Maryland. That probably didn't help."

Crissman also shared her personal symptoms.

"I can't get a counselor because I'm anxious about meeting a new counselor," she said, halfway between laughing and talking. "Returning to a more serious demeanor, she said, "I often feel physically ill and nauseous. I cry when I'm anxious, which is weird because everybody always thinks that's depression. But no, when I feel really overwhelmed I cry, and that's definitely brought on by anxiety and stress."

Kristina Khalid-Abasi, a junior in general studies at UL Lafayette, also commented on her own anxiety, which she was first diagnosed with two years ago.

"When I was diagnosed, I was having breakdowns left and right and having problems realizing what I actually wanted to do with my life," Khalid-Abasi said. "And it just kept getting worse because I felt like I would fail my parents."

She also shared her frequent symptoms.

"There are points where I get so anxious that I can't work. Because I can't work, that makes me more anxious, so then I can't work — it's a horrible cycle," she said. "Just talking about it, thinking about it, gives me anxiety."

Both students also shared what primarily triggers their anxiety at this current point in their lives.

For Crissman, it's "probably social situations," she said. "New people make me nervous and anxious. And school, for sure. The first day of class. I always get like violently ill."

For Khalid-Abasi, it's "schoolwork, but also it's really just family. If anything else, money right now because I have to take care of my ESA by myself, and I didn't have a job yet, so I'm sorting that out right now," she said.

The students explained what helped their anxiety.

"I'm making myself do what I'm anxious about," Crissman said. "Going and doing it — getting it over with even though it heightens my anxiety in the moment — ultimately, makes me less anxious for the next time."

Crissman also enjoys talking to her friends, doing other activities such as horseback riding as a distraction. Khalid-Abasi seeks comfort in other forms.

"Oh my gosh, my emotional support animal, Diego — I recently got him from a rescue facility and — oh my gosh — he is my everything. He keeps me on routine because any time when you show up, you know you have that dog's unconditional love," she said. "It just makes everything better."

Trahan commented on a common misconception of anxiety.

"I think the biggest thing is people think you can just get over it. And it's just something that we're biologically wired to have. We've got to know what's safe and not safe for us," she said.

"So, people with really high anxiety will more than likely scan their environment repeatedly to figure out, what's safe and what's not safe for them. And because our society's got so much stimulation around us all the time, it's really hard for our bodies to kind of pick and choose what is safe for us."

She also shared a good solution.

"Counseling is a great option to kind of get some of those worries out and discuss them and then figure out what you actually can do about it," she said. "Because when you feel like you have a sense of control over what you're experiencing, then the anxiety over the long haul reduces."

This mindset was echoed by both Crissman and Khalid-Abasi.

"If you have anxiety, it's real. Ask a specialist or go to a therapist or a doctor — someone — because stuff needs to get checked," said Khalid-Abasi.

"I know I don't go to a counselor, and this makes me a hypocrite, but you should," said Crissman.

UL Lafayette offers free counseling and testing to students by appointment at the Saucer Wellness Center located in O.K. Allen Hall.