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The Impact of Social Anxiety on the Occupational Participation of Third Level Students

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1. Background

Social Anxiety is a common mental health disorder with a high prevalence rate among third-level students (Fehm et al. 2008).

Social anxiety can affect students grades and their academic participation in college (Russell & Topham, 2012)

This qualitative descriptive study aimed to describe the phenomenon of social anxiety from the perspective of those experiencing it.



<http://www.flickr.com/photos/maxwellgs/4267311036/in/photostream/>

2. Methodology

Ethics

- Approved by University Ethics Committee
- All students who made contact were given details of counselling support

Recruit

- Posters distributed across the campus
- Email to the student population

Eligibility

- Undergraduate students over 18
- Scoring over 65 on the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Liebowitz, 1987)

Interview

- Occupational Circumstances Assessment Interview and Rating Scale (OCAIRS) (Forsyth et al. 2005).

Analysis

- Thematic Analysis (Robson, 2011)

3. Participants

3 male and 3 female undergraduates aged 19-22
All experiencing clinically significant levels of social anxiety

4. Thematic Results

Self-criticism and fear of judgement from others influenced all areas of occupational performance

Academic work - "I can't avoid giving presentations so I'd just go in and I'm terrified....you just lose any sense of calmness...and when you try to rush and get it out of the way, it makes it worse" (PA)"

Social life - "I'd like to try new things and meet new people - I'm just afraid of doing it" (PF)

Attention and Concentration - "I get so focused on what other people are thinking of me that I just get completely distracted" (PE)

Engagement with the physical environment - "I like tutorials because there's less people, but lectures because you're not noticed as much" (PC)

Engagement with the social environment - "You don't know whether you should say hello to them or keep moving, so you end up going between a few groups and just standing awkwardly.... I would worry" (PB)

5. Discussion

Students with social anxiety are significantly impacted in academic and social activities during their time at university (Russell & Topham, 2012).

Universities can be 'toxic environments' for those with social anxiety, and many lives are dictated by social fears (Russell & Shaw, 2009).

Cognitive models suggest a reason for this high level of self-criticism and fear of judgement.

Socially anxious individuals direct their attention to internal cues of arousal and use this to erroneously infer how they appear to others (Taylor & Alden, 2011).

Occupational participation is affected as individuals choose occupations and environments based on their perceived potential to cause an increase in anxiety..



6. Implications

The role of cognitive distortions in maintaining social anxiety supports other studies that show that Internet-based cognitive-behavioural therapy is an effective treatment with significant benefits (Andersson et al., 2013).

7. References

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