

Sources of Anxiety Among Freshman College of Science Students and their Coping Skills to Manage Life Difficulties

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ABSTRACT

College life is an educational milestone that can be exciting and incredibly challenging for freshman students. Creating a fresh new start may also entail adjusting to the new environment, creating positive interactions with peers and professors, keeping up with the academic demands, and balancing time for personal and social life. However, these normal developmental experiences during college may not be easy for all. Literature shows a prevalence in the increase of mental health concerns among college students. Considering this, this study focuses on identifying the sources of anxiety among freshman College of Science (COS) students and their coping skills to manage life difficulties. A total of 210 participants were enrolled in a non-academic course designed to increase mental health literacy and career development among freshman students at a private university in the Philippines. Using the Adolescent Personality Questionnaire (APQ) administered online, data were collected and analyzed through quantitative descriptive design. Results revealed that more than half or 58% received high average to high scores in anxiety. More so, their sources of anxiety were categorized into personal discomfort (discouragement, worry, and poor body image), getting in trouble (anger or aggression, authority problems, and alcohol or drugs), and the context of difficulties (problems at home and school). On a lighter note, 66% of the participants reported having an average to a superior level of coping skills. They tend to see themselves as capable and equipped to manage their concerns. In conclusion, the significance of an extensive mental health program at the university is discussed.

Key Words: freshman college students, anxiety, life difficulties, and coping skills

INTRODUCTION

Adjustment is particularly significant in freshman students. During their first year, transitioning to greater academic demands, a bigger campus environment, a different educational system, unfamiliar peers and teachers, higher expectations from the family, and a new set of goals are some of the things that a freshman student needs to surpass these challenges to be successful with their university life. However, these changes might also bring discomfort and difficulties to many college rookies. Although generally, anxiety is a natural emotion composed of fear and uncertainty when an individual encounter an unfamiliar situation however, if it is perceived to be beyond the individual's capacity and threatens his ego and self-esteem, this feeling can blow up and affects individual psychological well-being (Harris & Coy, 2003). Numerous researchers have already found the prevalence of mental health concerns among college students (Hamaideh, Al-Modallal, Tanash & Hamdan-Mansour, 2022; Abdallah & Gabr, 2014; Auerbach et al., 2016). The study on mental health disorders among college students in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys revealed that anxiety disorder is the leading psychological illness among college students ages 18 to 20 (Auerbach et al., 2016). Furthermore, a high level of anxiety could affect students' academic performance, relationships, and quality of life which is also detrimental to their academic success and well-being (Vitasari, Wahab, Othman & Awang, 2010).

Conversely, coping is an action to lessen or mitigate the problematic situation (Ray, Lindop & Gibson, 1982). This also includes efforts to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in response to different stressors in everyday life (Morales-Rodríguez & Pérez-Mármol, 2019). To manage anxiety and other psychological stressors, the student should equip himself with effective coping strategies that will aid him in overcoming issues and concerns encountered during college adjustment. In the qualitative study by Denovan and Maca skill (2013) on phenomenological analysis of stress and coping among first-year undergraduate students, participants used a variety of useful coping strategies that facilitated adjustment in the university. These optimism, hope, self-control, and self-efficacy were identified as positive psychological strengths that the students employed to cope with stress. Effective coping strategies are essential to promote mental health (Rahnama, Shahdadi, Bagheri, Moghadam & Absalan, 2017).

Research Problem

The study's main objective is to identify anxiety sources among freshman College of Science (COS) students and their coping skills to manage life difficulties. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research problem:

1. What is the level of anxiety of freshman COS students?
2. What are the sources of anxiety of freshman COS students?
3. What is the level of coping skills of freshman COS students?

METHODOLOGY

The participants were 210 first-year college students aged 18 to 20 taking different courses under the College of Science. They were enrolled in a non-academic course that primarily promotes mental health awareness and career development. Personality testing is one of the requirements under this course, with online modules completion and initial group interview. Students were given a specific date and schedule for the online administration of the Adolescent Personality Questionnaire (APQ) facilitated by a counselor and/or examiner from the psychological testing provider.

Through purposive sampling, participants were given informed consent to determine their willingness to participate in the current study. It was emphasized that no identifiable data would be used in this research, and clearance from the research review board will be secured to use secondary data needed in this study.

The instrument used in this study is the APQ. It is helpful in areas where personality is relevant such as educational adjustment, personal or social difficulty, and passage through one's developmental tasks, which makes it very suitable for freshman students. Likewise, this personality test was specifically developed and normed for their age group. The APQ is divided into four major sections: personal styles, problem-solving, work activity preference, and life difficulties. Specifically, this research will identify the level and sources of anxiety of the participants, one of the global factors of APQ, and their coping skills to manage life difficulties. Furthermore, the result will be used for future program development, specifically for the College of Science students.

This research utilized a quantitatively descriptive method to analyze the data that will be collected.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of this study, which was conducted in accordance with the policy set by the Ethics Review Board. Only those who submitted their signed informed consent were included in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants comprised 210 College of Science students in their first year. Ages are between 18 to 20, with 143 (68%) females and 67 (32%) males. Notably, the female participants had twice as much as males since this is based on the enrolled freshman COS students during the academic year, and female students dominated the number of enrollees. With this limitation, gender was not considered a variable in this study.

The level of anxiety was measured and presented in Table 1. The Adolescent Personality Questionnaire (APQ) has a scoring guide and pre-determined scoring levels or interpretations.

Table 1. Level of Anxiety of Freshman College of Science Students

Level of Anxiety	F	%
Low	17	8
Low Average	15	7
Average	57	27
High Average	50	24

The table showed that most students suffer from a high average (24%) to a high (34%) level of anxiety. These students would often experience self-doubt, emotional concerns, and apprehension. More so, 27% scored average, indicating that they generally feel secure but would tend to feel tense when faced with pressures. Transitioning to college can change the student’s life, which might increase the student’s stress levels. Oftentimes, students encounter overwhelming demands on physical, psychological, academic, and social responsibilities that make them vulnerable to psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Hamaideh et al., 2022)

Consequently, having a high level of anxiety can be detrimental to the student’s mental health. It can be crucial for academic success since students display a remarkably lower motivation to actively engage in classroom performance than a low level of anxiety (Hancock, 2001). Anxiety can also affect an individual’s daily functioning, including relationships with people and the performance of assigned and expected tasks (Mustafa, Melonashi, Shkemi, Besimi & Fanaj, 2015). For university students, anxiety may also hamper concentration and memory, which in effect, can challenge students’ cognition, such as the capacity to understand and learn the lesson (Vitasari et al., 2010). Moreover, this result on the prevalence of anxiety among first-year COS students is also congruent with the study of Auerbach et al. (2016), wherein they examined the mental health status of 1572 college students in 21 countries and found that anxiety is the most prevalent mental health concern among the sample.

This study aimed to identify the sources of anxiety among first-year students. Table 2 presents the different areas of life difficulties from the APQ to identify the primary reasons for students’ anxiety. The categories under life difficulties were pre-determined items from the APQ scale and scores were computed based on the participants’ responses.

Table 2. Sources of Anxiety of Freshman College of Science Students

Life Difficulties	Low		Below Average		Low Average		Average		High Average		Above Average		Superior	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Personal Discomfort														
Discouragement	23	11	0	0	40	19	2	1	65	31	6	3	74	35
Worry	17	8	0	0	31	15	44	21	0	0	48	23	69	33

Poor Body Image	38	18	6	3	0	0	44	21	46	22	2	1	76	36
Overall Discomfort	21	10	15	7	15	7	40	19	2	1	53	25	65	31
Getting in Trouble														
Anger or Aggression	0	0	105	50	6	3	55	26	2	1	38	18	8	4
Authority Problems	40	38	0	0	50	24	48	23	17	8	0	0	13	6
Alcohol or Drugs	0	0	0	0	151	72	2	1	32	15	17	8	8	4
Overall Trouble	67	32	42	20	40	19	32	15	13	6	8	4	6	3
Context of Difficulties														
Problems at Home	0	0	71	34	0	0	67	32	0	0	40	19	32	15
Problems at School	19	9	0	0	0	0	80	38	0	0	0	0	124	59

Life difficulties are divided into three categories. The first is personal discomfort which includes discouragement, worry, poor body image, and overall discomfort. The result shows that 69% of the students, or more than half, exhibit high average to superior levels of discouragement. This implies that most students display low energy levels and tend to lean on a negative perspective about a certain situation or be pessimistic. On the other hand, only 11% got a low score in this aspect. Similarly, more than half of the students, or 56%, obtained above-average to superior levels of worry. This means they tend to react to events negatively by overthinking and worrying. On the other hand, 21% scored average, indicating they could manage their worries and focus on the tasks at hand. Furthermore, the result also shows that COS students experience problems with their weight and eating habits as they are significantly conscious of their physical appearance, as indicated by a 59% score on poor body image ranging from high average to superior levels. Only 29% of students seemed comfortable and confident in their body image. In general, most COS students, or 57%, displayed high average to superior levels of discomfort. High discouragement, worry, and poor body image scores may indicate they are also facing emotional troubles. Discomfort and worry do not facilitate adjustment and learning in students' academic life (Vitasari et al., 2010), on the contrary, higher levels of optimism and motivation to succeed paved the way to overcome challenges by utilizing social support and active coping strategies which resulted to greater psychological adjustments (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

Another source of life difficulties among COS students is getting in trouble. More than half of the students, or 79%, scored below average to average levels of anger or aggression. This means that if they are feeling frustrated about certain situations, students tend to avoid violent reactions. However, 23% scored high average to superior levels, which indicates that when provoked, they may have difficulties controlling their emotions and aggressive behavior. Most students would respond well to rules and authority, as 85% scored low to average levels on problems with authority. On the other hand, 14% fall under high average to superior levels, which suggests they tend to get into trouble with policies and authority figures. In addition, a significant number of this group 73% said they do not have difficulties avoiding alcohol and drug use. Meanwhile, 27% reported that they might encounter problems regarding this issue. Generally, the scores of COS students in overall trouble indicate that 86% would avoid getting into trouble on rules, authorities, alcohol and drug use, and acting out aggressively towards others. Nonetheless, there are about 14% reported tendencies to be prone to getting into trouble or demonstrating defiant behavior. Specifically for this area, results showed that most students have high self-control. According to Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone (2004), students with higher self-control will be more likely to adapt effectively to the environment, achieve academic success, have better impulse control, have fewer tendencies for binge eating and alcohol abuse, have greater interpersonal skills, and can follow policies and conform with group life. Likewise, Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister (1998) emphasized that through self-control, an individual demonstrates self-discipline and prudence in his own behavior to achieve set goals.

Lastly, the context of students' difficulties was identified, whether the sources of anxiety came from school or at home. Results revealed that 53% of students perceived to have a superior level of difficulties in school, 38% reported having an average level of school-related problems, and only 9% showed a low level of perceived problems in school. On the other hand, 66% of the students perceived a low to average level of concern at home, and 34% claimed to have a stressful home environment. Comparably, in the study of Denovan and Macaskill (2013), the results also revealed that most students experienced stress and difficulties in school caused by establishing new routines and peer support, taking bigger responsibility for independent living, managing finances, adapting to more complex academic demands, balancing extra-curricular activities, and planning career roadmaps. Moreover, coping with academic tasks such as homework and attending regular classes, tutorials, and examinations were found to be the source of impediments for university students (Morales-Rodríguez & Pérez-Mármol, 2019). In addition, as part of the limitation of the APQ scale, the overall score for the context of difficulties was not identified.

Table 3. Level of Coping Skills of Freshman College of Science Students

Level of Coping Skills	F	%
Low	31	15
Below Average	40	19
Low Average	0	0
Average	59	28
High Average	0	0
Above Average	0	0
High	80	38

The table above shows that 66% of the freshman students from COS have average to high levels of coping skills. This indicates that they tend to see themselves as capable of managing different stressors, coping well with difficulties, adjusting to their environment, and delivering academic tasks. However, 34% of students had trouble handling challenges and difficult situations. College is a passageway from adolescence to adulthood wherein there are expected developmental skills for these students to acquire and master (Zaleski, Levey-Thor & Schiaffino, 1998), and coping with stress is one of them. For a successful academic adjustment, active coping or focusing on doing something positive to solve the problem is very helpful (Leong, Bonz, & Zachar, 1997). Furthermore, coping strategies such as being optimistic, hopeful, self-efficacious, highly self-controlled, and identifying available resources often facilitate positive adaptation to stressful situations and promote psychological wellness (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Any changes in the usual environment and responsibilities also bring a chance to grow and learn new experiences, yet oftentimes they become sources of stress (Fisher, 1994). This is similar to freshman college students adjusting from senior high school to university life, and it was confirmed in the results of this study that students were highly stressed and anxious during this transition period. In addition, academic performance is one of the crucial factors in these circumstances that lead to psychological stress and pressure, such as anxiety (Vitasari et al., 2010). Aside from academic demands, it is also notable that most students display low energy, pessimism, worries, and poor self-concept. In this regard, the school is important in facilitating positive student adjustment. Orientation, information campaigns, student services and programs, building social networks, and study groups can help build resources and elevate protective factors on students' transition. Moreover, institutionalized and sustainable mental health activities and programs involving the whole academic community that promote positive coping skills and resiliency integrated into the curriculum would benefit the students. Learning sessions and training that enhance stress

management, problem-solving skills, and mental toughness can also build their confidence and competencies in handling stressful events. Lastly, responsive counseling services should also be in place to address the student's mental health needs, especially those experiencing psychological distress. Providing evidence-based intervention to help students flourish, reach their maximum potential, enjoy university life, and achieve academic and career success.

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