

Understanding learning anxiety and mental health of final year students: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, excessive worry, and unpleasant feelings that assume that something bad will happen. Learning anxiety can also be interpreted as a feeling of worry while an individual experience an under pressure situation and inability to complete something. It is normal for students to have excessive anxiety during the learning process, due to the many internal and external factors that occur in their environment. The research method used was descriptive qualitative research. The research instruments used were interviews and observations. The researcher conducted observations at the Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara and obtained three final year students who experienced excessive learning anxiety, which could disrupt their learning activities. This greatly affects the students' mental health. Therefore, the researchers aim to examine the impact of excessive learning anxiety on students' mental health. Among the three students, two students experienced excessive learning anxiety, which had an impact on their physical and mental health. These two students experienced symptoms of shortness of breath and sleep disturbances that interfered with their daily activities. While one student merely had general learning anxiety in the form of fear of something bad happening, which is often experienced by students in general.

Keywords: *academic anxiety, mental health, students, final year*



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Introduction

The feeling of worry, anxious, and other unpleasant feelings are forms of anxiety. Individuals often experience anxiety when they encounter unfavorable situations. This anxiety can be experienced by anyone, including students, because everyone experiences unfavorable situations

and this is a part of individuals' life to experience anxiety as long as they experience it in a reasonable limits. Anxiety can arise due to certain situations and conditions that make individuals uncomfortable, and can unconsciously be caused by something specific. When anxiety levels are moderate, an individual's thoughts are only focused on that particular condition and disregard other things. However, when anxiety levels are high, an individual's thinking is impaired and they only focus on small things, neglecting others, so the individual are not able to think clearly (Suratmi, Abdullah, & Taufik, 2017).

Humans often encounter the situations that can cause anxiety, especially students who often experience excessive anxiety during their learning activities. For example deadline tasks, impromptu exams, presentations, late arrival to campus, forgetting to do something, etc. These activities can cause anxiety, but it is very normal. Anxiety is a normal reaction experienced by every human being. However, if the anxiety is excessive and disproportionate, it will affect mental health and hinder an individual's function in life. Anxiety is a state of worry or panic about something bad happening. Many things are worried about by every human being, starting from careers, health, exams, environmental situations, and so on. Heretofore, anxiety is still regarded as a disease by many people. This feeling of anxiety and restlessness is a symptom of mental illness or mental disorder, which, if they become excessive, will attack physical health (Malfasari et al., 2018)

Research conducted by Claudya and her colleagues was studied through a literature review about Generalized Anxiety Disorder which GAD is explained by several factors, such as genetic and biological factors. However, from a psychoanalytic point of view, there are two initial causes of GAD that appear, include overly strict and harsh rules, and also overly protective parents towards their children. Meanwhile, according to humanistic perspective, GAD arises when a person are not able to accept themselves, therefore causing anxiety that an individual feel they cannot fulfill their potential as humans. Then there are disruptions in thinking or the emergence of negative thoughts. This research explains the efforts in dealing with anxiety experienced by individuals. First, through Cognitive Behavior Therapy by changing negative thought and behavior patterns into positive ones. In addition, CBT help individuals to do relaxation exercises and assignments through exposure to things that cause their worry (Soen, Hardjasmita, & Ulituna, 2021)

Previous research conducted by nursing students from the Faculty of Nursing and Health, Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang, was found that there is a level of stress related to generalized anxiety disorder or anxiety experienced by final year students. The stress experienced by these students is caused by external and internal demands that affect their mental, physical, and emotional conditions during the preparation of their final projects. If the students are not able to overcome it, this stress has a significant impact on students. The research aims to draw special attention to addressing the stress levels experienced by students through counseling services (Angelin, Syenshie, & Ferlan, 2021)

However, research has also been conducted by Deliviana and colleagues on the management of students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has caused stress symptoms in students due to changes in learning methods that have affected their mental health. Thus, there is a need to manage students' mental health from both internal and external factors by increasing their spirituality, engaging in positive activities, and thinking positively (Deliviana et al., 2020)

Anxiety can be defined as a threatening and uncontrollable condition towards a certain event, excessive, unmanageable, and worrying in daily life (Farid, Jalal, & Iqbal, 2022). According to Oltmans, anxiety can be centered on a situation, feeling, or syndrome, characterized by a sense of

fear of threat or danger. Furthermore, he explains that, generally, the intensity of fear can increase. In this case, it will affect an individuals' response to avoid or fight the threat they encounter. Meanwhile, Djiwandono suggests that there are two types of anxiety: first, trait anxiety, which is a person who often experiences anxiety or worry and give more responds to certain situations, with symptoms such as sweaty palms and a pounding heart. Individuals with trait anxiety are more sensitive than others. Second, state anxiety, which is anxiety that occurs when a person is under a specific threat. Therefore, a person who is not anxious may become anxious if they are under that particular threat (Munaisah, 2015). From these definitions, it can be concluded that anxiety is a feeling of worry, fear, and restlessness towards unpleasant conditions or situations and being under a certain threat.

According to Chaplin, learning anxiety in psychology is defined as the mixing of feelings, restlessness, fear in learning, and concern about the future without any specific individual cause (Kusumastuti, 2020) In some cases, individuals who experience learning anxiety are influenced by negative experiences of their behavior, such as worrying about failure, feeling frustrated in certain conditions, and uncertainty in doing something. Based on the definition above, learning anxiety is a subjective and unpleasant learning experience caused by worry, tension, and emotions experienced by an individual. Learning anxiety is also the feeling of anxious when someone learns and then experiences pressure and inability to face problems (Apriani, Aryani, & Saman, 2021). Anxiety disorders have been found as mental health disorders with symptoms of depression and stress (Daulay, Harahap, & Sinaga, 2022). This anxiety disorder is characterized by excessive anxiety and worry that interferes with several activities that individuals are not able to control. Generalized anxiety disorder is also equated with depression, behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities (Secer, Gulbahce, & Ulas, 2019). Anxiety arises due to a response or problem, which occurs when someone undergoes a change in their life and is required to adapt (Susilo & Eldwaty, 2021). Some symptoms experienced are restlessness, easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating, empty mind, easily angered, and difficulty sleeping. This is often experienced by students who are in the process of preparing their final assignments.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), there are 264 million people with mental disorders, which placed in sixth ranked in mental health problems considered as suicide indicators (2017). In the United States, a group of 18-year-olds presented a percentage of 2.9%, with women having more prevalence at 7.78%, while men were only 4.6%. This is in line with the results of the Singapore Mental Health Study, which showed an increase in GAD incidence in Singapore recorded in 2010 for the age group of 18-34 years at 1.2% to 2.2% in 2016, and the prevalence of GAD was found by students at 2.0%. Based on the results of the Global School-Based Students Health Survey in Indonesia, it was noted that out of 11,142 respondents, 40.75% of Indonesian teenagers experienced anxiety, emotional mental symptoms were experienced by 60.17%, and 7.33% experienced suicide attempts. It can be concluded that excessive anxiety occurs at certain periods that can trigger Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and should be taken seriously by every individual, especially among student.

The main aspect in determining someone's health is their mental health. According to the WHO, mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which individuals are able to realize their own abilities, cope with normal life stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community (WHO, 2013). As for mental health based on Law Number 18 of 2014, it is defined as an individual's physical, psychological/mental, spiritual, and social well-being, where the individual is

aware of their own abilities, able to cope with stress, productive in their work/activities, and able to contribute to their community.

Individuals with good mental health are able to avoid mental illnesses and have a healthy and prosperous mental state (Suryanto & Nada, 2021). The demands from outside or within that are experienced by students, especially those in their final year of completing their thesis, possibly will impact on their mental health. This is experienced through symptoms of anxiety disorders, such as excessive anxiety, fear, and panic as a response to not being able to overcome the demands as a final year student. Higher education students are a group of people who are in their young adult years and tend to experience various mental health problems (Nazira et al., 2022). This statement is due to the fact that students, aged 17-25, are in the transitional phase from adolescence to early adulthood, which has a high risk of emotional disorders (Setiyani, 2018).

Student mental health is closely related to issues of academic achievement, financial problems, and physical health, resulting in sub optimal learning processes by students (Cahyani, Satriani, & Sagitariani, 2021). The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of excessive learning anxiety experienced by final year students on their physical and mental condition. Based on a survey conducted at the Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, there are final year students who experience symptoms of anxiety disorders, characterized by difficulty sleeping, restlessness, excessive anxiety, complaining and worrying about not being able to complete tasks, eating or overeating difficulty, and panic due to demands and deadlines from lecturers. The benefit of this study is to provide education, therefore the readers/students are able to prevent it.

Method

This research uses descriptive qualitative research, which is conducted by collecting data through interviews from several informants based on observations in the field (Sugiyono, 2015). The results will be described or presented through more detailed and in-depth words, and narratively depict the activities that being conducted. Walidin explains that qualitative research is a research process to understand human or social phenomena by creating comprehensive and complex descriptions that can be presented in words, reported in detail information obtained from sources of information, and conducted directly in the field (Leskono, 2016).

This study involved 3 students as research subjects, with data collection techniques starting from observation and interviews. There are several steps in conducting this research, the first step is observing and finding the cases that are similar to the research title. Observation is the act of seeing the facts that happen in the field. The second step is to conduct interviews with research subjects. Interviews consist of questions given by the researcher to the informant in order to supplement the research results. Thirdly, the results of the interviews are compiled descriptively to be used as a research source. Fourthly, to make the research complete, several quotes are taken through literature review to collect information sources or data from books, journals, or other news as reference material to study theories from various literatures related to the research. The literature obtained from various references will be analyzed to support the proportions and ideas in the research.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Based on the observation of subject A, the individual experiences panic, frequently complains about doing something, and afraid of failing or unsure about what they are doing. Negative thoughts arise when working on something. The observation of subject B shows that the individual exhibits a lack of confidence when doing something, leading to worry if something unexpected happens that they cannot control. However, the observation of subject C shows that they are disturbed by their thoughts, leading to overthinking and disruption of their daily activities, resulting in an irregular sleeping pattern.

According to the three observations of subjects A, B, and C, the similarity is that they all experience excessive anxiety in their learning experiences, having feelings of fear and thoughts which disturb their minds and lives. The difference is that subject A is anxious about failure, subject B is anxious due to a lack of self-confidence, and subject C is anxious due to excessive thinking.

The results of the interview with subject A indicate that the individual experiences anxiety due to several factors, including pressure from parents to complete their education quickly, below-average grades, and "killer" professors who are difficult to meet. As a result, the individual experiences excessive panic that causes worry and a long-lasting tightness in the chest of about 15 minutes, which can disrupt daily activities. In order to achieve good grades, the individuals are expected to reach the desired target, which results in a lack of normal sleep or rest time. The individual should rest around 10 pm, but due to coursework, the individual does not have enough time to rest. However, this is also due to the individual's negligence in completing assignments by the deadline. Other physical signs include weight loss. Nevertheless, the individual can overcome their anxiety by making a priority scale, practicing inhaling and exhaling, creating a comfortable room by using aromatherapy, sometimes relaxing, maintaining a healthy lifestyle by taking care of their body and drinking plenty of water, and occasionally listening to sholawat music when studying.

The results of the interview with subject B indicate that the individual experiences anxiety due to several factors, including complicated tasks, a fast-approaching deadline, and of course, the target of graduating quickly. This causes a lack of rest and eventually leads to insomnia. In completing tasks, the individual often experiences exhaustion. Additionally, the individual feels dizzy and has a racing heartbeat when experiencing anxiety or worry, which greatly disrupts their studying activities.

The result of the interview with subject C is that the individual experiences anxiety due to excessive thinking or overthinking about criticism given by others towards their academic process. This causes the individual to have a desire to prove that they are capable of doing their best. However, there are no physical symptoms present in subject C, merely a lack of sleep or insomnia due to the anxiety and overthinking that arises at night. To control this anxiety, they engage in activities such as going for walks or reading novels.

From the observation and interviews, it is clear that they often experience excessive anxiety and worry during their learning process. This is especially true for those who have been in several semesters and is the beginning of the excessive anxiety that arises during the learning process. The anxiety experienced by senior students is generally classified as moderate to severe. This is a common experience for many students in their final semesters. Although anxiety can lead to physical and cognitive symptoms that affect a student's personality in their senior year (Akhmar et

al., 2022), it is normal for individuals to experience anxiety. However, this anxiety can have a significant impact on students, including physical and psychological effects. Physical effects can include headaches, muscle tension, insomnia, depression, and social isolation.

Discussion

The results of the interviews with subjects A and C are related to the factors of anxiety such as exams, mismatched grades, overwhelming demands, and tasks. One of the characteristics when an individual experiences anxiety is the feeling of breathlessness in the chest. The way to handle anxiety experienced by subject A is similar, which is through relaxation, aromatherapy, and can also be done through Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

The results of the interview with subject B are almost similar to the research conducted by Mukholil (2018) which discusses learning anxiety, starting from factors, characteristics, symptoms, and also how to learn to achieve success. It discusses that anxiety arises from the pressure and worries of individuals that affect their physical and mental state. If anxiety is still at a low level, individuals still feel safe in facing exams and grades. However, if the level of anxiety is high, it will disrupt the learning process and make individuals feel insecure in taking tests, thus excessive anxiety arises, as experienced by subject B.

Based on the theory related to the results of the interviews, anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling and one of the disorders that students may face and affect their mental health. The causes of learning anxiety experienced by students come from several factors, including internal factors such as demands from parents, while external factors such as the learning environment, difficult-to-find "killer" lecturers, grades that do not meet the target, and others. This anxiety disrupts students' activities and concentration while learning. Anxiety is also defined as an individual who is in a state of fear or discomfort, lack of confidence, decreased learning concentration, which affects learning performance or the completion of tasks marked by various symptoms. From physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, trembling, to dizziness and others. And also some symptoms of behavior that make individuals more isolated, remain silent, sleep disturbances, decreased appetite, avoiding complex tasks, while cognitive symptoms are negative thoughts, excessive worry, pessimistic about their ability to work on problems, and worried if the results of their work are poor, and others (Rosefa, Iskandar, & Oktaviyana, 2022).

One of the types of disorders commonly experienced by some teenagers and college students is a generalized anxiety disorder, or GAD (Diferiensyah, Septa, & Lisiswanti, 2016). GAD is a disorder characterized by a general sense of anxiety and anticipation of bad things happening, often accompanied by physical symptoms. This type of anxiety disorder is common and can occur in mid-adolescence until mid-twenties. As a result, many college students experience this type of anxiety, especially during the process of completing their final assignments. They may feel anxious and worried about not being able to complete their work on time.

When an individual experiences anxiety, one of the symptoms that may occur is a feeling of panic and tightness in the chest, which can make it difficult to breathe. Other symptoms of GAD include tension, restlessness, worry, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and sleep disturbances, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep and restless sleep (Pristianto et al., 2022). Other symptoms may include a range of elements, such as feeling worried about something bad happening or feeling helpless, difficulty concentrating, feeling restless, having headaches,

tremors, and feeling unsteady. Other symptoms may include overactive autonomic activity, such as feeling lightheaded, excessive sweating, racing heart, shortness of breath, stomach complaints, headache, dry mouth, etc (Maslim & Rusdi, 2013)

Based on DSM-5, there are six criteria that indicate an individual may have Generalized Anxiety Disorder or GAD. Firstly, experiencing worry and anxiety that lasts for several days within the last 6 months. Secondly, difficulty controlling feelings of anxiety and worry. Thirdly, the onset of anxiety is indicated by other symptoms such as feeling under pressure, easy to get tired, difficulty concentrating, easily angered and tense muscles, and sleep disturbances. Fourthly, the anxiety, worry, and other physical symptoms cause significant impairment in social and occupational functioning in daily activities. Fifthly, anxiety is not caused by a medical condition. Sixthly, the anxiety disorder cannot be explained by other mental disorders (Prajogo & Yudianto, 2021).

According to Keyes, mental health is not just the absence of mental illness but also the presence of well-being. In accordance with this statement, Veit and Ware (Radiani, 2019) argue that psychological well-being includes two aspects. The first aspect is individuals do not experience psychological distress, which is characterized by high levels of anxiety, depression, and loss of control. The second aspect is the presence of psychological well-being, which is indicated by positive feelings in general, emotional states, and life satisfaction. Mental health is also determined by complex factors such as biological, psychological, social, economic, religious, and environmental interactions. El-Quusy argues that mental or spiritual health is the perfection and harmony between various mental functions, accompanied by the ability to encounter mild mental shocks, which usually occur in everyone, and to positively experience happiness and ability. The adjustment process is influenced by factors such as frustration (emotional pressure), problems (issues), and anxiety (Radiani, 2019).

Good mental health according to WHO (World Health Organization) should generally be avoided from neurosis and psychosis. Neurosis can be defined as a state in which a person is free from anxiety disorders, personality disorders, emotional disturbances without reason, and disorders related to nerve abnormalities. Psychosis, on the other hand, is a mental disorder related to the soul and mind that consists of delusions, illusions, and hallucinations. Mental health is an entity that affects several internal and external factors. Mental health greatly affects these factors because they play a significant role in the creation of mental health. These factors include biological and psychological factors, which are internal, and social-cultural factors, which are external. External factors have a significant impact on a person's mental health, such as social interaction between family, school/university, and society. Therefore, external or internal factors towards mental health have a strong position in human life. A person's mental health is influenced by biological factors such as gender. Men and women have different characteristics and behaviors, with men being more active and exploratory, while women are more sensitive and feeling anxious easily. Mood/emotional disorders and anxiety often occur during adolescence and are more common in women.

In addition, there are characteristics of individuals with good mental health, they include being able to love oneself, being more responsible, independent, able to control emotions, and having a life purpose. In the preparation of the final project, students must have good mental health. When studying, students must be able to control their emotions and concentrate to assist in the preparation of the final project. If their mental health is disrupted, it will hinder the process of preparing the project.

From the various types of anxiety, there is a negative impacts occur physically, including: 1) Central Nervous System. Anxiety has a significant effect on the body, with the first impact being through the central nervous system. In the long term, excessive anxiety and panic can cause the brain to release stress hormones regularly, resulting in an increase in symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, and depression. 2) Cardiovascular System. The next impact that affects health is the cardiovascular system. Anxiety disorders can cause rapid and pounding heartbeats and chest pain. The risk of high blood pressure and heart disease is possible. 3) Excretory and Digestive System. In addition, the excretory and digestive system can be disrupted due to anxiety. It may cause stomach pain, nausea, diarrhea, and other digestive problems. Loss of appetite can occur when experiencing excessive anxiety; 4) Immune System. Anxiety can cause a fight-or-flight response or release excess chemicals and hormones such as adrenaline into the immune system. In the short term, it can increase heart rate and breathing so that the brain can receive plenty of oxygen. However, when anxiety and stress are repeatedly experienced for a long time, the body will not receive a signal to return to its original function. This can weaken the immune system, making it more susceptible to infections, diseases, and viruses. 5) Respiratory System. Anxiety can also disrupt the respiratory system, causing fast and shallow breathing. If someone has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, the risk may be higher, and asthma symptoms may worsen due to anxiety.

There are also some psychological symptoms that include sleep disturbances (nightmares, difficulty sleeping, restless sleep), lack of concentration, inability to focus, feelings of sensitivity (easily embarrassed and tense, full of worry and fear, restless and easily confused, being pessimistic and lacking self-confidence, and feeling unhappy (Mukholil, 2018).

From this explanation, it is clear that excessive anxiety, also known as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, can be very dangerous if it is not addressed properly, although its causes are generally not specific. The efforts to overcome this issue include individuals paying attention to the emotional problems they are experiencing. They also need psychological education that explains the physiology of the body and some anxiety symptoms and medications that are given. Furthermore, exercise and maintaining a healthy diet can also be helpful. Another effective approach is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which is often used for anxiety in teenagers or college students (Ginsburg et al., 2019). This therapy is used to reduce anxiety experienced by individuals. It helps them to better understand how the human mind works. Negative thoughts are redirected towards positive ones, therefore individuals are able to reduce their level of anxiety. Another general treatment is to provide intensive relaxation training with the hope that learning to relax will prevent anxiety from developing uncontrollably. In this therapy, individuals are able to express their own emotions, therefore the are able to understand how to deal with factors that make it difficult for them and avoid behaviors that will cause anxiety.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that anxiety is a feeling of discomfort, lack of confidence, fear, and worry about something bad happening. Anxiety disorders are often experienced by college students, especially in their learning process or completing difficult tasks. This is normal, but if it becomes excessive and is not addressed properly, it will have an impact on the physical and psychological condition of students. The factors that contribute to anxiety are both internal and external. Internal factors include pressure from parents to achieve high grades, while external

factors include difficulties with professors. Students may also experience symptoms such as shortness of breath, heart palpitations, difficulty sleeping, and fatigue. However, they can control their anxiety in their own way by maintaining a healthy lifestyle, drinking plenty of water, praying, practicing relaxation techniques, and using inhale, exhale, and priority scales to create their learning process more comfortable and refreshing, as well as engaging in other activities. In addition, the physical impact of anxiety can cause shortness of breath, while the psychological impact includes excessive worrying and insomnia.

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