

Relationship between anxiety and academic performance of nursing students, Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety is a common cause of poor academic performance among students in every part of the globe. The aim of this study was therefore to determine the relationship between and academic performance of students in the faculty of Nursing, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State. A descriptive survey was used to obtain data from respondents who gave consent to the study. Data obtained was analysed using Statistical Package for Science Solutions (SPSS) version 17. Result indicated that generally students expressed anxiety during examination which is seen as physiological, psychological and behavioural changes and abnormality. Also, at $P < 0.05$, chi square (X^2) = 2.144, difference (df) = 3 and P value 0.543, there was no statistical difference between gender and academic performance of students. The need for students to be counselled to maintain optimal thought process and health during examination was therefore emphasized.

Keywords: academic performance anxiety, anxiety disorder, examination, stress.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a psychological and physiological state characterized by physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural components. Anxiety means trouble; in either presence or absence of psychological stress, anxiety can create a feeling of fear, worry, uneasiness, and dread [5]. It is considered to be a normal response to stress. It may help an individual to cope with the demands of life but in excess it may be considered as anxiety disorder [28]. [34] reported that anxiety is a global problem affecting mainly children and adolescents. In America, anxiety is the most common illness and approximately 40 million adults have anxiety disorders [34]. [5] observed that an optimal level of arousal and mindset is necessary to best complete a task such as an examination, perform an act or compete in an event. However, when the anxiety or level of arousal exceeds that optimal level, the result is decline in performance. Hence the individual fails to fulfill the required obligation [15]. Anxiety is an intrinsic part of human nature and if we learn why something happen it usually becomes less frightening [19]. Psychologists made a distinction between two basic types of coping strategies which include problem focused strategies and emotion focused strategy [32]. Problem focused strategy attempts to deal with those aspects of environment that are responsible for stress and anxiety expression, that is dealing directly with the stress situation while emotion focused strategy tends to change the way a person thinks about a stressful situation.

It is when anxiety is in its severe form that some students experience genuine problem in academics. Their minds go blank, they experience the shakes, their hands go numb and they suffer from a number of sudden disabilities associated with anxiety during examination. Academic performance is the outcome of education. It refers to the extent to which a student, teacher or institution has achieved their educational goals. This goal is known to be influenced by anxiety. [15] reported that anxiety can occur as a result of stress, affecting learning and memory and also affecting academic performance negatively. According to [20] an optimal level of stress can enhance learning ability and improve academic performance.

Concept of Anxiety

In contrast to fear, anxiety involves a more general or diffused emotional reaction - beyond simple fear - that is out of proportion to threats from the environment [2]. Anxiety is defined by [33] and [1] as 'a complex psychological and behavioural state.' [16] opined that anxiety, an emotional state of a human during life is both life – saving and also causes many problems in the mental life of human beings. Humans have to always express inner struggles with different words, moods, feelings and emotions. Therefore in terms of the internal struggles, man uses expressions such as anxiety or worry. Anxiety is the most important factor of mental disorders based on the theory of psychological analysis. Freud called anxiety 'emotional pain. This means the same as if the body suffered from injury, inflammation and disease. Anxiety according to [21] is the price paid for civilization. [24], maintained that students' stress is an unavoidable phenomenon which is often seen in the undergraduates and postgraduates identified such factors as physical, mental, family, job and social relationship as contributing to stress in these students which they noted can affect their academic performances negatively. Anxiety surrounding examination and other specific situations affects approximately 25% to 40% of individuals [6], [9], [26], [33] with more females than males being affected. Anxiety interferes with school functioning only when an abnormal level is reached, where as within normal range, being anxious does not automatically imply worst school functioning and indeed may to a certain extent be motivating and enhancing to academic performance [25]. [10], ranked anxiety into four levels: mild, moderate, severe and panic anxiety.

1. Mild level of anxiety is healthy, at this level, perceptual field is heighten, pupils dilate to accommodate much light, hearing and smelling intensified, and sense of touch is highly sensitive. The individual is highly alert and attentive and learning and cognition is in its best state. This stage improves academic performance.

2. Moderate level of anxiety on the other hand is unhealthy, the perceptual field of a person at this level is narrowed; individuals experiencing this level of anxiety have selective inattention. They have decreased focus and automatism can be observed as repetitive purposeless movements such as shaking of the hands and feet, twirling of hair and, tapping of fingers. Academic performance at this level depends on the individual's ability to control the anxiety and carry out the assigned task.

3. Severe level of anxiety is characterized by reduced perceptual field and a difficulty in communication. Gross motor movements, such as pacing are characteristic of people at this stage. Academic performance at this stage depends on the educator's ability to recognize such individuals and provide a safe environment for them. Communication should be kept short and simple since communication is altered. Performance at this stage is reduced since most educators may not be able to provide such environment for the student.

4. Panic level of anxiety is the worst and most severe form of anxiety. Total disruption of perceptual field is present. It is also characterized by loss of ability to communicate, loss of rational thought and total loss of conscious thinking. Academic performance at this level is very poor since the student will be unable to remember exactly what he/she is supposed to do.

Anxiety has been categorized by [1] into several psychiatric disorders as follows:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Individuals that suffer this condition live each day in a state of high tension, feeling uneasy and tends to overreact even in mild stresses. The individual finds it difficult to concentrate instead worry about potential problems. Data from the Early Developmental Stages of Psychopathology (EDSP) study revealed a cumulative incidence for GAD as 4.3% at age 35years with relatively few onset observed in childhood, and the core incidence period being in adolescence and young adulthood [22].

Panic Disorder: This is characterized by episodes of acute and overhauling apprehension to terror; it begins abruptly and reaches a peak within 10 minutes with such symptoms as perspiration, muscle tremors, faintness and shortness of breath. Eventually this fear intensifies and interferes with every day school activities thus disrupting concentration, classes, reading, assignments and decision – making resulting to poor academic performance. Approximately 6 million American adults aged 18 and above, or 2.7% of people in this age group in a given year have panic disorder [23].

Agoraphobia: Involves intense fear and anxiety of any place or situation where escape might be difficult, leading to avoidance of the situation such as being alone outside the home, travelling in a car, bus, airplane, writing an examination or being in a crowded place [23].

Phobias: It is a persistent fear of specific object or situation. The fear occurs when the phobic individual is brought in contact with the object or situation. This reason is why some students perform badly in certain courses, it is

estimated that 10% of Americans have symptoms of specific phobia [1]. The life time prevalence of phobias in women is 17.7% compared to 10.4% in men [32].

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders: Individuals with this condition feel compelled to think about, things they would rather not think about or perform acts they do not wish to carry out. Obsessions are persistent irresistible urges to carry out certain acts or ritual. Obsessive thoughts may be linked with compulsive acts, example thoughts of brushing your teeth many times before attending a class. People with this disorder are preoccupied by these irrelevant thoughts that they cannot control and their academics suffer negative consequences. OCD affect 2.2 million American adults [23].

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: It is a type of anxiety that occurs after a frightening event or situation. This affect academic performance because, some students continue to dwell in their past failure and are unable to face the new challenges before them. These students often perform poorly academically since they fail to concentrate on the new challenges. PTSD affects 7.7 million American adults [23].

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS

Academic performance is a term used to describe the rating of a student following an examination. This is an important aspect of a student's life and is known to be influenced by various factors including anxiety and level of hard work/preparations done prior to the examination [11].

[30] opined that academic performance is measured by the standing rates of grades of students in every subject and students have their own attitude towards learning and achieving a high level of academic performance. In order for a student to succeed he needs to be armed with strategies and techniques that will supplement his desire to reach his goals. One way is to have an efficient and adaptive study habit free of anxiety.

[31] stated that academic performance of nursing students can be determined by various academic and non-academic factors that include measures of previous academic performance such as college and high school grade point (GPA), scores of different aptitude tests, and certain demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, residential background and previous work experience. Furthermore, knowledge about predictors of academic performance help in developing strategies to facilitate students' success in nursing education programmes and ensuring adequate training and provision of man power in the nursing profession [3], [13].

The effect of anxiety on academic performance as revealed by [11] is not always obvious and new research funded by the [8] suggests that there may be hidden costs. The research found that anxious individuals find it harder to avoid distractions and take more time to turn their attention from one task to the next than their less anxious peers. They further stated that a lot of the negative effects of anxiety appear to be caused by difficulties with controlling attention. This suggests that training techniques designed to enhance attention; control the ability of students to ignore distractions and prevent the switching of their attention from one task to another could help anxious students to achieve their academic potential.

[11] also showed that anxious individuals often perform at a comparable level to non-anxious ones but only do so at a greater cost in terms of effort or perhaps long term stress. This implies that it is important that teachers focus not only on whether a student's academic performance seems to be satisfactory but also on how much effort the student had to put in to achieve that level of success. Anxious students may be trying desperately hard just to keep pace with academic demands and this could be at great psychological cost.

ANXIETY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS

Anxiety symptoms are extremely common in childhood and adolescence and can negatively interfere with general well-being, social life, academic performance and development of social skills. [25] stated that anxiety symptoms are associated with impairment of memory and cognitive functions and can contribute to poor school performance and academic failure. Anxiety as illustrated by [29], plays important roles in our lives. These include immediate reaction to stimuli following onset, anticipation and being prepared for important events in the future. It may be unpleasant, but it is often adaptive and in its absence one may have trouble as life becomes difficult to organize. They further pointed out that anxiety can disrupt our lives if it becomes maladaptive. However, [18] explained that the consequences of anxiety during test or examination may limit the educational or vocational development and promotion through the educational system. It is normal for a student to feel anxious before a test or examination, but it becomes problematic when the level of anxiety is excess. [26] opined that a variety of factors can contribute to a student's level of anxiety, examples include: past experience with courses, perception of course load, their inability to manage time, family issues and beliefs, which may have been shaped by a complex interplay of factors, may result to a unique reaction to a situation and lead to anxiety. The negative effects of anxiety can be explained by two models namely; the Interference and the Learning Deficit Models. According to the interference model, anxious

students are distracted due to task irrelevant cognitions and negative thoughts during examinations, while the learning deficit model proposes that it is student's ineffective study habits during preparation for an examination that causes them to be anxious [36].

Researchers found that anxious individuals find it harder to avoid distractions and take more time to turn their attention from one task to the next than their less anxious peers. This makes learning, reading, remembering and writing difficult affecting academic performance. Since, the anxious individuals perform at a comparable level to the non-anxious ones with a greater cost in terms of effort or perhaps long term stress; it is believed that students with high anxiety as well as those with low anxiety will have lower academic performance. Therefore, those with moderate levels of anxiety will perform the best [7]. [15], maintained that if an individual's experience is negative, then anxiety level will be higher, leading to lower academic performance. Consequently, if an individual's experience is positive, then the anxiety level will be lower leading to higher academic performance. From these investigations, it has been observed that high and lower levels of anxiety is related to poor academic performance while a moderate level of anxiety is related to optimum academic performance.

[17] reported that chronic anxiety has a detrimental effect on academic success. Every individual experience anxiety, although it most often ensues when the individual is uncertain about an outcome. [7] observed that about 30% of student nurses suffer from anxiety especially in specific situations including: test, examination and presentations. According to [4] the unfavorable effects of anxiety experienced by nursing students leads to the development of low self esteem over a period of time which adversely affects their academic performance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear that can be mild, moderate or severe. Every one has feeling of anxiety at some point in their life. For example, you may feel worried and anxious about sitting for an exam or a job interview.

Feeling anxious is some times perfectly normal however; people with severe form of anxiety find it had to control their worries. Their feeling of anxiety is more constant and often affects their performance or daily life. Many sources of anxiety have been reported for some time by students of Nursing Science Department which are often times related to long hours of study, practical work and assignments among others.

If a student experiences an increased level of anxiety, the anxiety may have a negative effect, resulting in decreased learning. These extreme levels of academic related anxiety may cause some of them to even leave the programme. If nurse educators can better understand the anxiety levels of students of nursing department, they will be able to develop curricular and educational interventions to minimize the anxiety levels of students. Hence, the need to investigate the impact of anxiety on academic performance of students of the Faculty of Nursing, Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between anxiety and academic performance among 200 level students of the Faculty of Nursing, Niger Delta University. The specific objectives of the study included:

1. To identify the various forms of anxiety experienced by students of the Faculty of Nursing in Niger Delta University.
2. To investigate the relationship between anxiety and academic performance among students of Faculty of Nursing in Niger Delta University.
3. To establish a link between sex and anxiety as relating to academic performance of students.

Findings of this study will improve the knowledge of not just students but the general public on anxiety so that they stand a better chance to manage anxiety and are able to prevent anxiety disorders that are often associated with extreme levels of anxiety. The findings will also add to the existing body of knowledge.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were sought to be answered by this study.

1. What are the various forms of anxiety experienced by students of nursing department?
2. What is the impact of anxiety on academic performance of nursing students?
3. Is there a link between gender and anxiety as it relates to academic performance of students?

HYPOTHESES

The following hypothesis was formulated for this study;

There is no statistical significant difference between anxiety and academic performance of male and female students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was descriptive in nature conducted on the relationship of anxiety and academic performance of 200 level students of the Faculty of Nursing, College of Health Sciences, Niger Delta University, Amassoma in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The criteria for selection was that 200 level is a transition stage for nursing students from pre-clinical to clinical; also it is at this level that the students take all the basic medical courses such as anatomy, physiology, medical microbiology and biochemistry alongside other external courses. This level is thus associated with a lot of academic demands on the students which is most likely to create tension and anxiety as the student struggles to keep pace with the rigorous academic demands. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 50 students out of 100 students from 200 level in the faculty of nursing science. Permission was sought and obtained from the faculty to carry out the study. To ensure the cooperation of the selected respondents, clarification as regards the purpose of study was made from the onset of the study and participants were assured confidentiality of information provided. The questionnaire used for the study was designed by the researchers and self administered to the students and collected at the spot after been dully completed by the students. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A was designed to collect data on personal variables of gender, age and religion. The other Section B focused on the study objective. The questionnaire had items on indicators of variables to require the opinion of respondents. The statements formed questionnaire designed responses was tabulated on a five (5) scale basis of not at all typical of me, not very typical of me, some what typical of me, fairly typical of me and very typical of me.

To establish the content validity of the instrument used, the researchers presented the research instrument to other research experts for assessment, positive criticisms, suggestions and advice. All comments made were critically looked into and needful areas implemented. Reliability was ensured by carrying out a preliminary test (pilot study) on ten students from the department of medicine. Following the pilot study, items which were ambiguous were discarded and those missed out were added to the new and final questionnaire as appropriate. The data obtained from the study was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). This involved entry of data into frequency tables, mean and chi-square analysis for inferential statistics.

RESULTS

TABLE 1: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF RESPONDENTS (n=50)

S/N	Biodata	(f)	(%)
1	Age:		
	15-20	10	20.0
	21-25	31	62.0
	26-31	5	10.0
	32-37	2	4.0
	38 and above	2	4.0
2	Gender:		
	Male	12	24.0
	Female	38	76.0
3	Marital status:		
	Single	41	82.0
	Married	9	18.0
	Divorced	0	0.0
	Separated	0	0.0
4	Religion:		
	Christianity	49	98.0
	Traditional religion	1	2.0
	Islam	0	0.0

Table 2: Psychological expression of Anxiety among Students during Examination

S/N	Question/Statement	(f)	(%)
1.	Thought of doing poorly interferes with my performance:		
	Not at all typical of me	27	54.0
	Not very typical of me	15	30.0
	Some what typical of me	6	12.0
	Fairly typical of me	1	2.0
	Very much typical of me	1	2.0
2.	Thinking of things unrelated to the actual study material:		
	Not at all typical of me	36	72.0
	Not very typical of me	7	14.0
	Some what typical of me	2	4.0
	Fairly typical of me	5	10.0
	Very much typical of me	0	0.0
3.	Usually get very depressed after taking an examination:		
	Not at all typical of me	28	56.0
	Not very typical of me	8	16.0
	Some what typical of me	3	6.0
	Fairly typical of me	6	12.0
	Very much typical of me	5	10.0
4.	Feel very panicky when I have to take on an examination:		
	Not at all typical of me	27	54.0
	Not very typical of me	14	28.0
	Some what typical of me	6	12.0
	Fairly typical of me	2	4.0
	Very much typical of me	1	2.0
5.	I do better of when I am not anxious in an examination than in the once that I am anxious:		
	Not at all typical of me	15	30.0
	Not very typical of me	1	2.0
	Some what typical of me	9	18.0
	Fairly typical of me	0	0.0
	Very much typical of me	25	50.0

Table 3: Physiological expression of Anxiety among Students during Examination

S/N	Question/Statement	(f)	(%)
5.	Frequently get nervous and forget facts I already know:		
	Not at all typical of me	29	48.0
	Not very typical of me	14	28.0
	Some what typical of me	2	4.0
	Fairly typical of me	5	10.0
	Very much typical of me	5	10.0
6.	Sweat profusely:		
	Not at all typical of me	43	86.0
	Not very typical of me	5	10.0
	Some what typical of me	2	4.0
	Fairly typical of me	0	0.0
	Very much typical of me	0	0.0
7.	Frequently tense that my stomach gets upset:		
	Not at all typical of me	25	50.0
	Not very typical of me	12	24.0
	Some what typical of me	8	16.0
	Fairly typical of me	3	6.0
	Very much typical of me	2	4.0
8.	Fast breathing:		
	Not at all typical of me	19	38.0
	Not very typical of me	9	18.0
	Some what typical of me	17	34.0
	Fairly typical of me	2	4.0
	Very much typical of me	3	6.0

Table 4: Behavioral Expression of Anxiety among Students during Examination

S/N	Question/Statement	(f)	Percent (%)
5.	I wish examination did not bother me so much:		
	Not at all typical of me	15	30.0
	Not very typical of me	16	32.0
	Some what typical of me	5	10.0
	Fairly typical of me	4	8.0
6.	Feel anxious even when prepared:		
	Not at all typical of me	19	38.0
	Not very typical of me	10	20.0
	Some what typical of me	7	14.0
	Fairly typical of me	5	10.0
7.	Mostly fall sick days before an examination:		
	Not at all typical of me	37	74.0
	Not very typical of me	1	2.0
	Some what typical of me	2	4.0
	Fairly typical of me	6	12.0
8.	Never always complete 80% of my study load:		
	Not at all typical of me	13	26.0
	Not very typical of me	14	28.0
	Some what typical of me	6	12.0
	Fairly typical of me	9	18.0
9.	Do not find it difficult to prepare for an exam:		
	Not at all typical of me	16	32.0
	Not very typical of me	7	14.0
	Some what typical of me	13	26.0
	Fairly typical of me	6	12.0
10.	Hardly organize study and leisure time:		
	Not at all typical of me	19	38.0
	Not very typical of me	10	20.0
	Some what typical of me	11	22.0
	Fairly typical of me	6	12.0
	Very much typical of me	4	8.0

Table 5: Relationship between Gender and anxiety and Student academic performance

VARIABLE	I do better of when I am not anxious in an examination than in the once that I am anxious:			X ² -value	Df	p-value
GENDER	Not typical of me	Some what typical of me	Typical of me			
Male	2	2	8	2.144	3	0.543
Female	14	7	17			

Table 5 above showed the relationship between Gender and anxiety in determination of students' performance during examination. At $p < 0.05$, chi-square (χ^2) value = 2.144, difference (df) = 3 and Pearson coefficient (P-value) = 0.543, there was no statistical significant relationship between gender and anxiety with respect to student academic performance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Students' academic performance has been observed to be influenced by several factors including anxiety. In this study, a total of fifty (n=50) aged 15-25years, mainly singles and Christians took part in the study (table 1).

Results from Table 2 and 3 indicated that anxiety is a common cause of poor academic performance during examination among few students. This anxiety is often expressed as psychological, physiological and behavioral abnormalities during examination. Such findings are consistent with the definition of anxiety by [30] and [1] who stated that anxiety is a complex psychological and behavioural state and to the statement by [13] who identified four components of anxiety. The findings also conform with the work by [22] in a community sample of children and adolescents who observed that anxiety is a common cause of poor academic performance among students. Similarly studies by [23] also supported the fact that anxiety contributes to poor academic achievement and attainment during examinations.

Findings of this study contract the findings of [7] and [15], who in their separate works observed that moderate anxiety is essential for better academic performance and the absence of anxiety may eventually lead to a poor academic performance as anxiety is a trigger to hard work among some students.

The study further revealed that there was no statistical significant difference between anxiety among males or females performance in examinations. This was shown by the fact that at $P < 0.05$, Chi-square (X^2) = 2.144, difference (df) = 3 and Pearson coefficient (P-value) = 0.543, there is no statistical significant relationship between anxiety in male and female gender and their academic performance among two hundred level nursing students. This implies that gender does not have a significant role in determining the level of anxiety and academic performance of nursing students. This finding was unlike studies by [24] which indicated that females were more anxious than males.

NURSING IMPLICATION

Anxiety disorder is a common cause of poor academic outcome among students at every level of learning. Nurses play key role in school health programs including counselling services to undergraduate students. It becomes fundamental that every nurse is adequately knowledgeable about the impact of anxiety on academic performance of students to enable them encourage a state of complete mental health and alertness with possible optimal academic performance and attainment. Nurses should be aware that they are a primary source of scour to students in all spheres of learning and the need to ensure adequate counselling and optimal academic performance of students should be their ultimate goal. More also, with clinical training being one of the most vital component of nursing education, it is imperative that nursing educators continue the effort to help nursing students manage their anxiety during this process. The better the nursing students can manage their anxiety, the more successful they can be in their clinical training.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study revealed that anxiety which is expressed as psychological disturbances, physiological imbalanced and behavioral abnormalities is common problem faced by students during examination, and negatively affects students' performance and outcome in examination. Although most respondents did not experience anxiety during examinations, 50% of them agreed that they performed better when they are not anxious than when they are anxious. The need for students to maintain optimal state of health and mind during examination was emphasized as this is important for better academic achievements.

Recommendation

The researchers based on the findings of this study, made the following recommendations:

1. Students should prepare adequately for any examination so that they are able to develop confidence in themselves and thus prevent examination related anxiety.
2. Student should be properly guided on need to handle and cope with anxiety and be made to understand that some level of anxiety is required in performing a particular task.
3. Nursing educators as well as other educators should create enabling learning environment free of tension and unnecessary stress so as avoid anxiety among their students.
4. Examinations and continuous assessment tests as well as assignments should be well planned and the students put into consideration during such planning to avoid undue stress on the students which most likely triggers anxiety.

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