Review Paper

Understanding Anxiety Prevalence and Risk Factors Among College Students: A Literature Review

Shahdeen Tabassum[1]*

ABSTRACT

Anxiety represents a significant mental health challenge among college students, impacting academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being. This review aims to synthesize existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of anxiety prevalence and associated risk factors within collegiate populations. Through an analysis of various studies, this review delineates the prevalence rates of anxiety among college students. It examines the extent to which anxiety affects this demographic and highlights its implications on academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being. Various factors contributing to anxiety among college students are explored. These include academic pressures, social stressors, and lifestyle choices. The review examines how these factors interact and exacerbate anxiety symptoms among college students. Understanding the prevalence and risk factors of anxiety in college students is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems. By addressing these factors, institutions can promote mental health and well-being on campus, ultimately fostering a conducive environment for student success. In conclusion, this literature review underscores the significance of addressing anxiety among college students. By synthesizing existing research, it provides insights into the prevalence rates and contributing factors of anxiety within collegiate populations.

Keywords: *Anxiety, College students, Prevalence, Risk factors, Mental health*

Anxiety represents a significant mental health challenge among college students, impacting academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being. The transition to college marks a pivotal developmental phase characterized by newfound independence, academic demands, and social adjustments. Consequently, comprehending the prevalence and risk factors associated with anxiety disorders among college students is imperative for devising effective prevention and intervention strategies within higher education settings. This literature review aims to offer a comprehensive examination of anxiety disorder prevalence rates, trends over time, and diverse risk factors, synthesizing empirical research and theoretical perspectives to inform mental health initiatives on campuses.

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[1]Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Patliputra University, Patna Bihar
*Corresponding Author

Understanding the temporal trends in anxiety prevalence among college students is crucial for identifying emerging challenges and adapting mental health support services to meet evolving needs. Longitudinal studies offer valuable insights into how societal, cultural, and environmental changes influence anxiety prevalence over time within higher education settings. Societal changes, including advancements in technology and shifts in social norms, may contribute to fluctuations in anxiety prevalence among college students. The pervasive use of digital platforms and social media, for example, has transformed how students navigate social interactions, academic pressures, and self-perception. Twenge et al. (2019) proposed that increased exposure to social media may exacerbate feelings of social comparison, perfectionism, and fear of missing out (FOMO), thereby contributing to heightened anxiety levels among young adults. Moreover, societal shifts in attitudes towards mental health and help-seeking behaviors may influence reporting rates and access to support services over time.

The competitive nature of higher education, coupled with escalating academic demands, represents a significant source of stress for college students. Deb et al. (2015) highlighted the impact of academic stress, parental expectations, and performance-oriented cultures on anxiety levels among college students. As academic standards evolve and educational systems prioritize achievement, students may experience heightened anxiety regarding grades, career prospects, and future success. Changes in pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, and curricular requirements may also impact anxiety prevalence among college students over time. Economic factors, such as rising tuition costs, student loan debt, and job market uncertainties, may contribute to fluctuations in anxiety prevalence among college students. Bulter et al. (2010) documented the association between college student employment and increased stress levels, highlighting the interplay between financial pressures and mental health outcomes. Economic downturns, recessions, and socioeconomic disparities may exacerbate financial stressors, affecting students' ability to afford education, housing, and basic necessities. Consequently, economic instability may contribute to fluctuations in anxiety prevalence among college students, reflecting broader socioeconomic trends.

Generational shifts in attitudes, values, and cultural norms may influence anxiety prevalence among college students over time. Twenge et al. (2019) examined age, period, and cohort trends in mood disorders and suicide-related outcomes, highlighting the impact of generational differences on mental health indicators. Changes in parenting styles, educational philosophies, and societal expectations may shape students' coping mechanisms, resilience levels, and susceptibility to anxiety disorders. Moreover, cultural factors, such as stigma surrounding mental health, access to healthcare resources, and cultural beliefs about stress and coping, may vary across generations and influence anxiety prevalence trends among college students.

By examining trends over time, researchers and policymakers can identify modifiable risk factors, implement targeted interventions, and monitor the effectiveness of mental health initiatives within higher education settings. Longitudinal studies provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors shaping anxiety prevalence among college students across different time periods.

Prevalence of Anxiety
Anxiety disorders represent a pervasive mental health concern among college students, with prevalence rates indicating a significant burden on academic performance, social

interactions, and overall well-being. A thorough understanding of the extent and impact of anxiety within the college population is essential for implementing effective intervention and support strategies.

Elevated Prevalence Rates:

The prevalence rates of anxiety among college students are notably higher compared to those observed in the general population, highlighting the considerable burden of anxiety within this demographic. Extensive research conducted globally consistently reveals elevated rates of anxiety disorders among college students, underscoring the urgency of addressing mental health concerns within higher education institutions. Meta-analytic studies examining the prevalence of anxiety disorders among college students worldwide have yielded alarming findings. Auerbach et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis incorporating data from multiple countries and reported a pooled prevalence rate of approximately 15% for anxiety among college students. This meta-analysis underscores the global scope of anxiety-related concerns within college populations. Research conducted in specific regions has further elucidated the prevalence of anxiety disorders among college students. Studies in North America, including the United States and Canada, consistently report elevated rates of anxiety disorders among college students (Beiter et al., 2015; Lipson et al., 2018). Similarly, studies conducted in European countries, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, indicate a high prevalence of anxiety disorders within college settings (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Auerbach et al., 2016). Comparisons between college students and their non-college-attending peers highlight the heightened prevalence of anxiety within the college population. Blanco et al. (2008) compared the mental health of college students to that of their non-college-attending counterparts and found significantly higher rates of anxiety disorders among college students. This disparity underscores the unique stressors and challenges faced by college students that contribute to elevated anxiety levels. Longitudinal studies examining trends in anxiety prevalence among college students suggest a concerning increase over time. Lipson et al. (2018) reported a significant rise in the utilization of mental health services by college students over a decade, indicating a corresponding increase in anxiety-related concerns. Factors such as academic pressure, economic instability, and societal changes may contribute to this upward trend in anxiety prevalence among college students.

Subclinical Anxiety Symptoms:

In addition to diagnosable anxiety disorders, subclinical anxiety symptoms are prevalent among college students, presenting a significant yet often overlooked aspect of mental health within this demographic. These subthreshold symptoms, while not meeting the criteria for a formal diagnosis, can still have a considerable impact on academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being. Research indicates that a substantial proportion of college students experience subclinical anxiety symptoms. Blanco et al. (2008) found that nearly one-third of college students reported significant anxiety symptoms that did not meet the diagnostic threshold for a formal anxiety disorder. Despite their prevalence, subclinical symptoms are often unrecognized or dismissed, leading to underestimations of the true extent of anxiety-related concerns among college students. Although subclinical anxiety symptoms may not reach the severity required for a diagnosis, they can still impair academic performance and daily functioning. Individuals experiencing subthreshold anxiety may struggle with concentration, motivation, and time management, leading to difficulties in meeting academic demands (Essau et al., 2014). Moreover, subclinical anxiety symptoms can adversely affect social relationships, extracurricular activities, and overall quality of life. Subclinical anxiety symptoms represent a potential

precursor to the development of full-blown anxiety disorders. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that individuals with subthreshold anxiety are at increased risk of experiencing escalating symptoms over time and developing clinically significant anxiety disorders later in life (Essau et al., 2014). Therefore, identifying and addressing subclinical symptoms early on is crucial for preventing the onset of more severe anxiety disorders. Individuals experiencing subclinical anxiety symptoms may be less likely to seek help or support compared to those with diagnosable anxiety disorders. The perception that their symptoms are not severe enough or that they should be able to manage on their own may deter them from seeking assistance (Lipson et al., 2018). Additionally, stigma surrounding mental health issues may further inhibit help-seeking behaviors among individuals with subclinical symptoms.

Trends Over Time:
Longitudinal studies examining trends in anxiety prevalence among college students reveal a concerning pattern of increasing rates over recent years. Various factors, including societal changes, academic pressures, and evolving cultural norms, contribute to this upward trend, highlighting the need for proactive measures to address mental health concerns within higher education settings. One notable trend is the significant increase in the utilization of mental health services by college students over the past decade. Lipson et al. (2018) reported a substantial rise in the rates of mental health service utilization among college students between 2007 and 2017. This trend suggests a growing recognition of mental health issues and an increased willingness among students to seek support for anxiety-related concerns. Societal changes, including advancements in technology, shifts in social media usage, and economic instability, may contribute to rising anxiety rates among college students. Twenge et al. (2019) proposed that increased exposure to digital platforms and social media may exacerbate feelings of social comparison, loneliness, and self-doubt, thereby contributing to anxiety symptoms among young adults. Additionally, economic factors such as rising tuition costs and financial pressures may exacerbate anxiety related to academic performance and future prospects.

The competitive nature of higher education, coupled with escalating academic demands, represents a significant source of stress for college students. Borenstein-Mauss, K. C. (2020) highlighted the impact of academic stress, parental pressure, and perfectionistic tendencies on anxiety levels among college students. With increasing emphasis placed on academic achievement and career success, students may experience heightened anxiety regarding their performance, grades, and future prospects.Evolving cultural norms and expectations may also contribute to changes in anxiety prevalence among college students. Twenge et al. (2019) suggested that shifts in societal values, such as an increased focus on individual achievement and self-promotion, may foster environments conducive to anxiety development. Moreover, changing attitudes towards mental health and increased awareness of anxiety disorders may lead to greater recognition and reporting of symptoms among college students. It's essential to consider the intersectionality of various factors, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, and identity, in understanding trends in anxiety prevalence among college students. Differential experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and systemic inequalities may exacerbate anxiety symptoms among marginalized student populations (Sue et al., 2022).

Gender Disparities:
Gender differences in the prevalence of anxiety among college students are well-documented, with females consistently reporting higher rates compared to males. This

gender disparity in anxiety prevalence is influenced by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive approaches to mental health promotion and intervention within higher education settings. Research consistently demonstrates that females are more likely than males to experience anxiety disorders during their college years. McLean et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive study examining gender differences in anxiety disorders among college students and found that females exhibited higher rates across various anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and panic disorder. This pattern of gender disparity persists across different cultural contexts and regions. Biological factors, including hormonal fluctuations and neurobiological differences, contribute to gender differences in anxiety prevalence. Hormonal changes associated with puberty, menstruation, and reproductive cycles may increase susceptibility to anxiety disorders among females (Craske, 2003). Additionally, genetic predispositions and neurobiological processes, such as differences in serotonin functioning, may influence vulnerability to anxiety in a gender-specific manner. Psychological factors, such as cognitive styles, emotion regulation strategies, and coping mechanisms, also contribute to gender differences in anxiety prevalence. Females tend to exhibit higher levels of rumination, worry, and interpersonal sensitivity, which are associated with increased risk of anxiety disorders (McLean et al., 2011). Furthermore, gender socialization processes may shape gender-specific patterns of coping and response to stress, thereby influencing anxiety susceptibility. Sociocultural factors, including societal norms, gender roles, and socialization practices, play a significant role in shaping gender differences in anxiety prevalence among college students. Societal expectations regarding femininity, such as the emphasis on nurturing, caretaking roles, and emotional expression, may predispose females to heightened anxiety symptoms (Craske, 2003). Moreover, experiences of gender-based discrimination, harassment, and societal pressures to conform to idealized standards of beauty and success may contribute to anxiety among females. Gender differences in help-seeking behavior further exacerbate disparities in anxiety prevalence among college students. Research suggests that females are more likely than males to seek help for mental health concerns and utilize mental health services (McLean et al., 2011). However, societal stigma surrounding mental health issues may still act as a barrier to help-seeking, particularly for males, leading to underreporting and undertreatment of anxiety symptoms.

Risk Factors Associated with Anxiety Among College Students
Several factors contribute to the development and exacerbation of anxiety among college students. These risk factors can be broadly categorized into demographic, environmental, and psychological factors.

Demographic Factors: Demographic characteristics, including gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, have a significant impact on the prevalence and manifestation of anxiety disorders among college students. Understanding the influence of these demographic factors is essential for tailoring interventions and support services to address the diverse needs of college populations. Gender disparities exist in the prevalence of anxiety disorders among college students, with females consistently reporting higher rates compared to males (Essau et al., 2000). Additionally, students from marginalized or minority backgrounds may face unique stressors related to discrimination, socioeconomic challenges, or acculturation, increasing their vulnerability to anxiety disorders (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Research consistently demonstrates gender disparities in the prevalence of anxiety among college students, with females exhibiting higher rates compared to males (McLean et al., 2011). This gender difference is evident across various anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and panic disorder (Essau et al., 2000). The heightened

vulnerability of females to anxiety may be attributed to biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors, including hormonal fluctuations, socialization processes, and gender role expectations (Craske, 2003). Socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in shaping the experiences and stressors encountered by college students, thereby influencing their susceptibility to anxiety disorders. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face additional financial pressures, inadequate access to mental health resources, and limited social support networks, which contribute to heightened anxiety levels (Adams & Moore, 2007). Conversely, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may experience anxiety related to academic performance expectations and social pressures associated with privilege and status (Stephens et al., 2014). The prevalence and expression of anxiety disorders vary across different ethnic and cultural groups, reflecting the influence of cultural norms, values, and beliefs on mental health outcomes (Sue et al., 2022). Moreover, cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues may impede help-seeking behaviors among certain ethnic groups, exacerbating anxiety symptoms (Alegria et al., 2010).

Environmental Factors: The college environment is replete with various stressors and challenges that significantly contribute to the prevalence and exacerbation of anxiety among students. Understanding the environmental factors that impact mental health is crucial for implementing targeted interventions and support services within college settings. Academic pressures, such as coursework deadlines, exams, and academic performance expectations, contribute to heightened stress levels (Beiter et al., 2015). Moreover, issues related to financial strain, housing insecurity, and difficulties balancing work and academic responsibilities further exacerbate anxiety symptoms (Lipson et al., 2018). College students face considerable academic pressures, including heavy coursework loads, demanding assignments, and stringent performance expectations, which can trigger or exacerbate anxiety symptoms (Beiter et al., 2015). The transition from high school to college often necessitates adjustments in study habits, time management skills, and academic self-efficacy, leading to heightened stress levels (Hudd et al., 2000). Financial strain is a prevalent stressor among college students, stemming from tuition costs, living expenses, and debt accumulation (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Students from low-income backgrounds may face heightened anxiety related to financial insecurity, limited access to resources, and concerns about meeting basic needs (Richardson et al., 2017). Moreover, the pressure to balance academic responsibilities with part-time employment to alleviate financial burdens further exacerbates stress and anxiety (Butler et al., 2010). The college experience entails navigating complex social dynamics, establishing new relationships, and coping with social pressures, which can be sources of significant stress and anxiety (Lipson et al., 2018). Students may experience feelings of loneliness, social isolation, or peer pressure, leading to heightened anxiety symptoms (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Additionally, concerns about social acceptance, rejection, or fitting in with peer groups contribute to anxiety-related distress, particularly among freshmen and transfer students (Tinto, 2017). Adequate housing is a critical determinant of mental health and well-being among college students. Housing insecurity, characterized by unstable living arrangements, homelessness, or overcrowded conditions, poses a significant risk factor for anxiety disorders (Bassuk et al., 2014). Students experiencing housing instability may struggle to concentrate on academics, maintain a sense of stability, or access essential resources, exacerbating anxiety symptoms (Schenck-Fontaine et al., 2020).

Psychological Factors: Certain personality traits and cognitive vulnerabilities predispose individuals to develop anxiety disorders. Perfectionism, neuroticism, and high levels of self-criticism have been identified as risk factors for anxiety among college students (Kawamura

et al., 2001). Additionally, maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance and rumination, perpetuate anxiety symptoms and hinder effective stress management (Andrews & Wilding, 2004). High levels of neuroticism, characterized by a tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, worry, and insecurity, are consistently associated with elevated anxiety symptoms (Ormel et al., 2013). Additionally, perfectionism, marked by excessively high standards and a fear of failure, often leads to heightened anxiety in academic and social contexts (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Cognitive vulnerabilities refer to maladaptive patterns of thinking that contribute to the development and maintenance of anxiety disorders. Individuals with a tendency towards excessive worrying and catastrophic thinking are more susceptible to anxiety symptoms (Hirsch & Mathews, 2012). Moreover, cognitive biases, such as selective attention towards threat-related stimuli and negative interpretation of ambiguous situations, perpetuate anxiety-related cognitive processes (Bar-Haim et al., 2007). In response to stressors, college students may employ maladaptive coping strategies that exacerbate anxiety symptoms. Avoidance behaviors, characterized by efforts to escape or avoid anxiety-provoking situations, only serve to reinforce anxiety in the long run (Spielberger et al., 1983). Similarly, rumination, defined as repetitive and intrusive dwelling on negative thoughts and feelings, amplifies feelings of anxiety and impairs effective problem-solving (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991).

CONCLUSION

Anxiety disorders represent a significant public health concern among college students, with high prevalence rates and detrimental impacts on academic and personal functioning. Recognizing the complex interplay of demographic, environmental, and psychological factors contributing to anxiety is crucial for implementing targeted interventions and support services within college settings. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to better understand the trajectory of anxiety disorders among college students and evaluate the effectiveness of preventative interventions.

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