

## Study on the Relationship Between Perfectionism and Anxiety in College Students: A Review

Ms. Riya Chaudhary<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Soni Kewalramani<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

College students who exhibit perfectionism—which is typified by having high expectations for themselves and evaluating themselves critically—have been found to have higher levels of anxiety. Research shows that higher levels of anxiety and stress vulnerability in this group are significantly predicted by maladaptive perfectionism, which includes worries about errors and uncertainty about actions. On the other hand, there is no discernible link between adaptive perfectionism and elevated stress or anxiety. The mediation function of mindfulness in this relationship is also shown by research. Anxiety symptoms are linked to poorer mindfulness, which is linked to higher degrees of maladaptive perfectionism. This implies that improving mindfulness may lessen the detrimental effects of anxiety and perfectionism. Additionally, it has been discovered that the association between self-compassion and maladaptive perfectionism is moderated by familial support. Strong family support increases self-compassion in students, which can reduce anxiety related to perfectionistic impulses. In conclusion, maladaptive perfectionism is a strong predictor of anxiety in college students, and this relationship is greatly influenced by family support and mindfulness. Anxiety levels in this population may be decreased by interventions that focus on enhancing mindfulness and fortifying family support networks.

**Keywords:** *Perfectionism, Anxiety, College Students, Maladaptive Perfectionism, Adaptive Perfectionism, Mindfulness, Family Support, Psychological Well-being, Academic Stress, Social Support*

College students are becoming more and more prone to perfectionism, which is characterized as the unrelenting pursuit of extremely high standards coupled with critical self-evaluation. The possible effects of this trend on mental health, especially anxiety, have sparked worries. Excessive worry about errors and uncertainty about actions are signs of maladaptive perfectionism, which has been shown to be a strong predictor of anxiety and stress susceptibility in this population. On the other hand, there is no discernible link between elevated stress or anxiety and adaptive perfectionism, which entails having high personal standards without the accompanying self-criticism.

<sup>1</sup>M.A. Clinical Psychology, AIBAS, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, UP, India.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, AIBAS, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, UP, India.

\*Corresponding Author

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Numerous obstacles arise during the transition to college life, such as social adjustments and academic expectations, which can heighten anxiety levels and aggravate perfectionistic impulses. Developing successful interventions to support college students' psychological well-being requires an understanding of the complex link between anxiety and perfectionism. This study examines the complex relationships between anxiety and perfectionism, highlighting the potential mediating and moderating effects of family support and mindfulness, respectively. The study intends to shed light on these connections in order to offer solutions that help lessen the negative impact that maladaptive perfectionism has on students' mental health.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF PERFECTIONISM**

According to Flett and Hewitt (2002), perfectionism is a multifaceted personality trait that includes the pursuit of perfection, establishing unreasonably high-performance standards, and engaging in an excessively critical self-evaluation. There are both maladaptive and adaptive aspects to this notion. High personal standards and goal-oriented actions are hallmarks of adaptive perfectionism, which is frequently linked to favorable results like motivation and academic success. Maladaptive perfectionism, on the other hand, is associated with psychological suffering, such as anxiety and depression, and includes traits like worry about errors, fear of receiving a poor grade, and uncertainty about one's behavior (Frost et al., 1990; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Researchers have been forced to differentiate between people who use their perfectionistic tendencies to improve their performance and others for whom perfectionism leads to emotional dysfunction because of the dual nature of perfectionism. In the context of college students, who frequently face significant academic and social demands that may intensify perfectionistic tendencies and the risks connected with them, it is imperative to comprehend this distinction.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF PERFECTIONISM**

#### **Multidimensional Theory of Perfectionism**

A multifaceted approach that conceptualizes perfectionism in three domains—self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed—was put forth by Hewitt and Flett (1991). Perfectionism can be classified as self-oriented, other-oriented, or socially mandated. Self-oriented perfectionism entails demanding perfection from oneself, whereas other-oriented perfectionism involves placing unattainable expectations on others. Because of the pressure to live up to perceived external expectations, socially imposed perfectionism has demonstrated the highest association with psychological suffering, especially anxiety, among them.

#### **Cognitive-Behavioral Model**

According to the cognitive-behavioral approach, perfectionism results from dysfunctional core beliefs such as conditional self-worth, which holds that one's value is dependent on fulfilling irrational expectations or winning others' acceptance. Perfectionists are more likely to engage in cognitive distortions such as "all-or-nothing thinking" and "catastrophizing," which perpetuate maladaptive behaviors and fuel anxiety and low self-esteem (Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002).

#### **Self-Discrepancy Theory**

According to the Self-Discrepancy Theory, which was developed by Higgins in 1987, emotional vulnerabilities occur when the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self do not

coincide. A significant discrepancy between their ideal performance and their actual performance frequently plagues maladaptive perfectionists, resulting in negative emotions including anxiety, humiliation, and guilt.

### **2×2 Model of Perfectionism**

The 2×2 model, first presented by Gaudreau and Thompson (2010), divides people into groups according to how high or low their personal standards and evaluative concerns are. Pure Personal Standards, Pure Evaluative Concerns, Mixed Perfectionism, and Non-Perfectionism are the four perfectionism profiles that emerge from this. While those with Pure Personal Standards may profit from their high expectations without the negative impacts of self-criticism, those with Mixed Perfectionism—high standards and high concerns—are more susceptible to worry and psychological suffering.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF ANXIETY**

Feelings of worry, trepidation, and fear are hallmarks of anxiety, a psychological and physiological state that can vary from slight discomfort to severe panic. Although excessive or persistent, it can become maladaptive and disrupt day-to-day functioning. It is a normal emotional reaction to perceived threats (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Cognitive symptoms (such as worry, rumination), behavioral symptoms (such as avoidance, restlessness), and physiological reactions (such as elevated heart rate, tense muscles) are commonly indicative of anxiety.

Anxiety is divided into various categories in clinical psychology, such as panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and particular phobias. Anxiety is one of the most common mental health conditions among college students, frequently brought on by social pressures, academic strain, and the adjustment to adulthood (Beiter et al., 2015). In this group, high anxiety has been associated with poorer academic achievement, social disengagement, and a higher risk of substance addiction and depression. Additionally, anxiety is seen as a spectrum, with state anxiety being a transient emotional reaction to certain stressors and trait anxiety denoting a consistent personality tendency to see circumstances as hazardous (Spielberger, 1983). Understanding how people react to stress differently depending on their personality features and the circumstances is crucial.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANXIETY**

#### **Cognitive Theory of Anxiety**

According to Beck's Cognitive Theory, anxiety results from skewed cognitive patterns, particularly when those patterns include an overestimation of threat and a low evaluation of coping skills (Beck & Emery, 1985). Cognitive distortions like selective abstraction, overgeneralization, and catastrophizing are common in people who suffer from anxiety. Through the establishment of a negative feedback loop between cognition and emotion, these thought patterns sustain and intensify emotions of anxiety.

#### **Biopsychosocial Model**

In order to understand how anxiety develops, the Biopsychosocial Model combines biological, psychological, and social variables. Anxiety disorders are caused and maintained by a combination of biological predispositions (e.g., hereditary vulnerability, neurotransmitter imbalances), psychological factors (e.g., personality traits, coping methods), and environmental effects (e.g., family dynamics, scholastic stress) (Engel, 1977). Because it takes into account both internal and environmental factors, this model is very helpful in explaining anxiety in college students.

### **Behavioral Theory**

According to behavioral theories that have their roots in classical and operant conditioning, anxiety is acquired through experience. Classical conditioning states that by repeatedly associating a neutral stimulus with an unpleasant experience, the neutral stimulus may learn to be associated with dread. Avoidance strategies that temporarily lessen anxiety but sustain the problem over time are reinforced by operant training (Watson & Rayner, 1920; Skinner, 1953). These frameworks aid in the explanation of phobias and social anxiety, in which people learn to stay away from circumstances that make them feel anxious.

### **Psychodynamic Theory**

According to Freud (1926), anxiety is seen from a psychodynamic standpoint as the outcome of internal psychological conflict, frequently stemming from unconscious fears and unsolved developmental concerns. This theory holds that anxiety sets off defense mechanisms to deal with emotional suffering and serves as a warning indication of an imminent threat to the ego. This hypothesis emphasizes how early experiences and unconscious processes contribute to anxiety, even though it is less experimentally validated in contemporary psychology.

### **Theory of Emotion Regulation**

According to the notion of emotion regulation, anxiety could result from problems controlling and regulating emotional reactions. People with anxiety frequently struggle with emotional clarity, acceptance, and the capacity to act in a goal-directed manner while they are in distress, according to Gross and Thompson (2007). Over time, poor regulation techniques like avoidance or suppression can make anxiety worse.

### ***Rationale of the Study***

A crucial time for academic, professional, and personal growth is during college. Students face significant social pressures, academic pressures, and greater obligations during this period, all of which can lead to increased stress and mental health issues (Beiter et al., 2015). Perfectionism and anxiety are among the most prevalent psychological problems in this group, and research has demonstrated that they have a substantial impact on self-esteem, academic achievement, and general well-being (Rice & Aldea, 2006; Bieling et al., 2004).

Anxiety and other mental health issues in students are increasingly linked to perfectionism, especially when it manifests in a maladaptive manner. Excessive worry about errors, dread of a poor assessment, and a recurring feeling of not being "good enough" are the hallmarks of maladaptive perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990; Flett & Hewitt, 2002). These emotional and cognitive processes frequently precede or reflect the emergence of anxiety disorders, resulting in a feedback loop that hinders students' capacity to perform well in social and academic contexts (Shafran et al., 2002).

Even while the connection between anxiety and perfectionism is becoming more well acknowledged, research in this field is still developing, especially when considering the different populations of college students. There is still a need to particularly investigate how perfectionistic tendencies impact the expression of anxiety in the particular setting of higher education, as the majority of previous research has concentrated on general psychological functioning (Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 epidemic and the post-pandemic transition have increased emotional and intellectual demands, making the study of anxiety and perfectionism more

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pertinent and necessary than ever. Perfectionism and anxiety may worsen as a result of the hybrid learning environments, heightened academic competitiveness, and changing social expectations that college students must now navigate (Wang et al., 2020).

In light of these worries, the purpose of this study is to investigate the connection between college students' anxiety and perfectionism in order to aid in the creation of more potent psychological treatments, support networks, and educational regulations. Knowing this relationship can help educators, legislators, and mental health experts identify pupils who are at risk and put strategies in place to promote more positive attitudes toward success and emotional resilience.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Many studies have examined the connection between anxiety and perfectionism in a variety of demographics, with an increasing amount of study concentrating on college students because of the increased demands they encounter. Anxiety disorders and perfectionistic impulses can be made worse by the increased academic responsibilities, social difficulties, and identity development that frequently accompany the move to university life.

#### ***Perfectionism and Its Psychological Impact***

The two main categories of perfectionism are maladaptive and adaptive. Maladaptive perfectionism is linked to psychological anguish, fear of failure, worry about errors, and uncertainty about activities, whereas adaptive perfectionism is linked to motivation and performance (Frost et al., 1990; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In college communities, where academic performance is frequently highly valued, maladaptive perfectionism is especially troubling.

According to Flett and Hewitt (2002), the most harmful kind of perfectionism is socially mandated, in which people feel under pressure to live up to others' expectations. This type of perfectionism is consistently associated with greater levels of anxiety and depression. To differentiate these types and comprehend their distinct psychological effects, their Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale has proven invaluable.

#### ***Anxiety Among College Students***

One of the most prevalent mental health issues in higher education is anxiety disorders. Up to 50% of college students report having moderate to severe anxiety, according to Beiter et al. (2015). The main causes are social pressure, financial worries, and academic stress. Spielberger's (1983) State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) has been a popular instrument for evaluating students' situational (state) and personality-related (trait) anxiety.

According to research, anxiety impairs decision-making, interpersonal connections, and general well-being in addition to academic performance (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Pupils with perfectionistic tendencies may feel more anxious because they worry about performing poorly, failing, or being judged.

#### ***Link Between Perfectionism and Anxiety***

Maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety have been shown to be significantly positively correlated in a number of studies. For example, Rice and Aldea (2006) discovered that among college students, perfectionistic worries predicted both trait anxiety and symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder. Similarly, compared to self-oriented or other-oriented

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perfectionism, socially mandated perfectionism was a better predictor of anxiety symptoms, according to Bieling, Israeli, and Antony (2004).

Furthermore, across a range of age groups and contexts, maladaptive perfectionism is a strong predictor of anxiety, sadness, and psychological distress, according to a meta-analysis conducted by Limburg et al. (2017). The results demonstrate that people who have high evaluative concerns are more likely to see failures negatively, which raises anxiety levels.

The cognitive-behavioral model of perfectionism, which maintains anxiety through relentless expectations and self-criticism, was highlighted in a more recent study by Egan, Wade, and Shafran (2011). According to their research, perfectionistic views skew how people perceive success and failure, leading to a chronic state of worry and hypervigilance.

### ***Cultural and Gender Differences***

The relationship between anxiety and perfectionism can be further complicated by gender roles and cultural expectations. According to studies, female students typically display higher levels of anxiety and socially imposed perfectionism than their male counterparts (Flett et al., 2001). Another factor is cultural background; Asian students, for instance, frequently report higher levels of perfectionism as a result of family expectations, which raises anxiety (Chang, 1998).

### ***Implications for Mental Health and Academic Support***

Knowing the connection between anxiety and perfectionism directly affects psychiatric treatments on college campuses. It has been demonstrated that cognitive-behavioral therapies that focus on perfectionistic thought patterns considerably lessen anxiety symptoms (James et al., 2015). Furthermore, children can be assisted in reframing their perfectionistic inclinations into more adaptive striving behaviors through psychoeducation and resilience-building programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current study emphasizes the important and intricate connection between college students' anxiety and perfectionism. According to research, maladaptive perfectionism—which is typified by strict personal standards, excessive worry about errors, and fear of being judged negatively—is closely linked to high anxiety levels. Chronic stress, poor mental health outcomes, and poor academic achievement can all be attributed to these perfectionistic impulses.

It is crucial to comprehend this relationship, particularly in light of the rising number of mental health issues that college students are facing. In order to assist students in cultivating more positive attitudes about success and self-worth, the results highlight the necessity of early detection of perfectionistic tendencies and the application of focused psychological therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral techniques.

Additionally, the study lays the groundwork for future investigations into how demographic, cultural, and environmental factors shape the perfectionism–anxiety interaction. This research helps to create a more supportive and emotionally healthy academic environment by raising awareness among educators, counselors, and legislators.

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In the end, helping college students deal with their anxiety and perfectionism is essential for their academic achievement as well as for fostering their long-term emotional resilience and general wellbeing.

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