

Qualitative Analysis of the Dynamics of the Relationship Between Anxiety and Health Behavior in College Students

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Submitted :02-11-2025, Accepted : 04-01-2026, Published : 01-02-2026

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of the relationship between anxiety and health behavior in college students, focusing on the impact of anxiety on eating patterns, physical activity, sleep quality, and coping strategies used by college students. This study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, involving in-depth interviews with 150 active college students who experienced anxiety related to their academic demands and social life. The results showed that anxiety, which was mainly caused by academic pressure, had a direct impact on college students' health behaviors. Some students coped with anxiety with positive coping strategies such as exercising, meditating, and seeking social support, while others were trapped in unhealthy behaviors, such as overeating or lack of sleep. Social support from friends and family was shown to play an important role in helping college students manage anxiety and maintain healthy health behaviors. This study concluded that anxiety has a significant impact on college students' health behaviors, and good psychological support and education on healthy living behaviors are essential to improving college students' well-being.

Keywords: Anxiety, Health Behavior, Coping Strategies, Student Activities

Introduction

Anxiety is a significant concern for college students, often stemming from academic pressures, social relationships, and personal issues. This anxiety can have detrimental effects on psychological and physical health, including sleep disturbances and cardiovascular problems (Rianti et al., 2024). Academic stress, in particular, is a major contributor, resulting in feelings of overwhelm and fatigue, which can negatively impact academic performance (Jones et al., 2018). Furthermore, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood can exacerbate these issues, as students navigate new responsibilities and expectations. To combat anxiety, promoting healthy coping mechanisms such as exercise, mindfulness, and social support is essential (Carver et al., 2021). Additionally, access to mental health resources on campus, including counseling services, plays a critical role in supporting student mental health and

reducing anxiety. Despite the importance of these factors, the relationship between anxiety and student health behaviors remains an underexplored area in psychological research. Anxiety is a common problem among college students, significantly impacted by academic pressures, social adjustment, and life transitions (Heathen, 2024). These factors contribute to increased levels of anxiety, especially during exam periods, which can impact students' health behaviors, such as diet, exercise, and sleep (Jia, 2024). Long-term anxiety can have detrimental effects on physical and psychological well-being, making it important to proactively address this issue. Effective stress management techniques, including mindfulness and deep breathing, can help students cope with anxiety and improve their overall health behaviors (Carver et al., 2021). Additionally, a strong social support network of friends and family plays a critical role in reducing anxiety, providing emotional resources that help students navigate their challenges (Pesko, 2020).

The relationship between anxiety and health behaviors in college students is complex and multifaceted. While some studies suggest that anxiety can motivate individuals to adopt healthier behaviors, such as exercising or seeking social support, other studies highlight the tendency for anxiety to lead to detrimental habits, including overeating and poor sleep (Choubey et al., 2024). This paradox is influenced by various individual factors, such as personality traits where traits such as neuroticism can predispose students to unhealthy behaviors (Qin et al., 2024) and coping mechanisms, which can either mitigate or exacerbate the effects of anxiety on health behaviors (Zheng et al., 2024). In addition, the role of social support networks is crucial; strong support can promote healthier choices, while weak networks can contribute to negative behaviors. Furthermore, academic stress significantly contributes to anxiety levels, further complicating the relationship between anxiety and health behaviors (Deng & Wang, 2024). Understanding these dynamics is critical to developing effective interventions. This study used a qualitative research approach to explore students' personal experiences, aiming to uncover the psychological mechanisms that drive their health behaviors, such as exercise and stress management (Åsberg et al., 2022). By focusing on these

mechanisms, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of why students engage in certain health-related actions, which is important for developing effective intervention strategies. Insights gained from this qualitative inquiry will inform targeted recommendations for interventions that enhance students' well-being, ultimately improving their overall health and happiness (Strehli et al., 2022). Understanding the interplay between psychological factors and health behaviors will enable the design of tailored programs that meet students' unique needs, thereby fostering an environment that supports their mental and physical health (Åsberg et al., 2022).

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with the aim of exploring students' experiences and perspectives related to the anxiety they feel and its relationship to their health behavior. This study will use a case study design with a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach allows researchers to understand individuals' life experiences and how they experience them in certain contexts (Moustakas, 1994). Participants in this study were active students enrolled at universities in the city of Bandung. The selection of participants will be carried out using a purposive sampling technique, namely the selection of participants who have direct experience related to the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). The number of participants who will be involved in this study is 50 students, considering the principle of saturation point, which is the point at which the data obtained is sufficient to provide in-depth understanding and no longer produces new information (Guest et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion

Results

Based on interviews conducted with 50 active students who experienced anxiety, the results of the study showed various dynamics between anxiety and students' health behaviors.

The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, and the five main themes found were as follows:

- a. Most participants reported that their anxiety was more dominant when facing exams, big assignments, and high academic pressure. This anxiety affected their sleep and eating patterns.
- b. Students used various coping strategies, including exercise, meditation, talking to friends or family, and seeking support from campus counselors.
- c. Some students reported that anxiety caused them to overeat as a form of escape, while others lost their appetite.
- d. Some students felt that anxiety prevented them from exercising regularly. However, some also admitted that exercise helped reduce their anxiety.
- e. Many participants expressed that social support from peers and family was very helpful in reducing anxiety and motivating them to maintain healthy behaviors.

Table 1. Interview Results and Key Findings

Theme	Subtheme	Description of Findings	Number of Participants Affected
Anxiety Related to Academic Demands	Academic demands cause stress and anxiety	Most students experience anxiety, especially before exams and major assignments, which impacts their health behaviors.	32 out of 50
Coping Strategies Used to Manage Anxiety	Exercise, meditation, social support	Students cope with anxiety through exercise, meditation, or by talking to friends and family. Some also use campus counseling services.	29 out of 50

Theme	Subtheme	Description of Findings	Number of Participants Affected
Impact of Anxiety on Eating Behavior	Overeating or loss of appetite	Some students report overeating as an escape from anxiety, while others experience a loss of appetite.	20 out of 50
Impact of Anxiety on Physical Activity	Decreased frequency of exercise	Anxiety leads some students to reduce physical activity, though others find that exercise helps relieve anxiety.	38 out of 50
Role of Social Support in Managing Anxiety	Support from friends and family	Students with strong social support report better anxiety management and healthier health behaviors.	31 out of 50

Source: Data Processed (2025)

Discussion

- a. Academic demands, such as exams and major assignments, often cause stress and anxiety among college students. Most college students experience anxiety, especially when approaching exams or major assignment deadlines. This can affect their health behaviors, such as eating patterns or sleeping habits. Based on these findings, 32 out of 50 college students reported feelings of anxiety related to academic demands. This anxiety can cause students to feel stressed, which can impact their overall quality of life.
 - b. To overcome anxiety arising from academic demands, most college students use various coping strategies. Exercise, meditation, and social support such as talking to friends, family, or campus counseling are their main choices. 29 out of 50 college students reported that they used these strategies to reduce anxiety. Exercise and meditation help calm the mind,
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while social support provides comfort and emotional reinforcement needed to cope with stress.

- c. Anxiety related to academic demands can affect college students' eating behaviors. Some college students reported that they overeat as a form of escape from anxiety, while others experienced loss of appetite. These findings suggest the influence of anxiety on eating patterns, which can be risky for college students' physical and mental health. 20 out of 50 students experienced changes in their eating habits, which can add to their physical and emotional burden.
- d. Another impact of academic anxiety is a decrease in exercise frequency. While anxiety often reduces physical activity, some students reported that exercise actually helped them cope with anxiety. This suggests that while anxiety can be a barrier, exercise can be an effective strategy for reducing stress and improving mental wellbeing. 38 out of 50 students indicated that anxiety affected their physical activity levels, but many also found exercise to be a way to reduce anxiety.
- e. Social support from friends and family has been shown to play a significant role in helping students cope with academic anxiety. Students with strong support networks reported better anxiety management and healthier health behaviours. With the support of those closest to them, students felt more resilient in dealing with academic pressures and were better able to maintain their wellbeing. 31 out of 50 students indicated that social support was very influential in their recovery and management of anxiety.

Anxiety related to academic demands is a significant problem for most students. Some of the impacts include effects on eating behaviour, physical activity and mental health. However, with effective coping strategies, such as exercise, meditation, and social support, students can more easily overcome this anxiety. Support from friends and family has been shown to be very helpful in managing anxiety and improving their health behaviors. Therefore, it is important for

students to develop healthy coping skills and utilize social support to maintain their well-being amidst high academic demands.

Conclusion

- a. Anxiety experienced by students is mostly influenced by academic demands, such as exams, major assignments, and pressure to meet academic expectations. This anxiety directly affects students' health behaviors, especially in terms of sleep patterns and eating patterns.
- b. Students use various coping strategies to deal with their anxiety, including exercising, meditating, talking to friends or family, and seeking support through campus counseling. Students who use positive coping strategies such as exercising or seeking social support tend to have better health behaviors.
- c. Anxiety causes some students to experience disturbances in their eating patterns. Some students cope with anxiety by overeating, while others experience a decrease in appetite. These unhealthy eating behaviors indicate a negative relationship between anxiety and balanced eating behaviors.
- d. Anxiety also has an impact on students' physical activity. Some students report a decrease in the frequency of exercise due to anxiety, while others feel that exercise can be an effective way to reduce anxiety. This shows that anxiety can hinder healthy living habits, but it can also be a trigger for some students to maintain physical health.
- e. Social support plays a very important role in helping students manage their anxiety. Students who have strong social support, whether from family, friends, or counselors, are more likely to be able to cope with anxiety and maintain healthy health behaviors. Social support also serves as a protective factor that helps reduce the negative impact of anxiety on their well-being. Overall, the results of this study indicate that anxiety has a significant influence on students' health behaviors. Students who experience anxiety need to receive better psychological support and guidance on healthy health behaviors, such as the

importance of exercising and maintaining a balanced diet. Strong social support can also be a key factor in reducing anxiety and improving students' overall well-being.

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