

**School Practitioner Community of Practice**  
(A network for sharing & exchange)

February 5, 2020

**Topics for discussion –**

**>About the rising number of students described as anxious  
Is anxiety overdiagnosed?**

**Links to a few other relevant resources & other topics of concern**

**Note:** Go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla> for links to other Center resources including

- >Upcoming initiatives, conferences & workshops
- >Calls for grant proposals, presentations, and papers
- >Training and job opportunities
- >Upcoming webcasts & other professional development opportunities

**This resource is from the  
Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, UCLA**

**Given education budgets, we have been asked to increase our outreach to make our free resources more available (e.g., for planning, professional development, etc.).**

*So please feel free to share with anyone you think might benefit (e.g., forward our resources to individuals and share on listservs and websites).*

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**For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

**For previous postings of community of practice discussions, see  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>**

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**Topic for Discussion –**

**>About the rising number of students described as anxious  
Is anxiety overdiagnosed?**

We received the following request:

*I am concerned about childhood mental health, especially the rising rates of anxiety diagnoses. Do you know of research on school accommodations for anxiety? I'm curious how much these have increased across the board and also whether they're well advised (given the anxious child's preference for avoidance to begin with). I'm also looking for information on school refusal rates, but am having a hard time finding anything.*

Underlying the request is the long-standing concern about whether anxiety is being overdiagnosed. Here's a brief excerpt indicating how one article raised the matter:

From: *Is Anxiety Overdiagnosed?*  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/08/is-anxiety-overdiagnosed/260549/>

*Overlooking socioeconomic conditions and jumping to a psychiatric diagnosis can prevent us from addressing the real issues behind anxiety.*

*... when Fragile Families administered a standard diagnostic interview for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), it found that the psychological condition was extremely common among the poorest mothers. ...*

*In a secondary analysis, researchers concluded that the anxiety seen in poor mothers is caused by poverty itself, not mental illness...*

*The danger of pathologization - calling something a disease when it may not be - is, in this case, that we end up mistakenly ignoring treatable context...*

**Center comments:** Clearly, from all reports, this is a current hot topic. In this context, we note that the initiative for trauma-responsive schools has gained considerable traction. And efforts to assess adverse childhood experiences have increased the number of students identified as anxious.

In specific response to the above request:

- (1) *About increased diagnosis of anxiety* – In finding research related to anxiety, one easy starting place is to take a look at our Center’s online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Anxiety* and access the links to resources from our Center and from others – Go to <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/xf/anxiety.htm>

Here are a few examples of our Center resources listed there:

- >*Students and Anxiety Problems* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/anxiety.pdf>
- >*About Social Anxiety and Schools* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/socanx.pdf>
- >*Anxiety, Fears, Phobias, and Related Problems: Intervention and Resources for School Aged Youth* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/anxiety/anxiety.pdf>

- (2) *About School Refusal* – The following 2019 resource on *School Refusal* by Kawsar includes in its discussion a statement about rates. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK534195/>

Here’s an excerpt:

School refusal is not a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5) diagnosis. It is described as a symptom that can be associated with several other diagnoses, for example, social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, specific phobia, major depression, oppositional defiant disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder, among others. School refusal describes the disorder of a child who refuses to go to school on a regular basis or has problems staying in school...A collaborative approach is required for the assessment and management of school refusal which includes the provider, parents, school staffs and other mental health professional.... It is difficult to determine the number of children that experience school refusal. A common statistic cited by organizations that advocate for increased mental health awareness say school refusal affects 2% to 5% of all school-age children....

Also, see the Quick Find on *School Avoidance* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/xf/schoolavoidance.htm>

Here are a few examples of our Center resources listed there:

- >*School Avoidance Behavior: Motivational Bases and Implications for Intervention* – <http://www.springerlink.com/content/j2833u4712l6h6g1/>
- >*Working with Disengaged Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/disengagedstudents.pdf>

- (3) *About accommodations and whether they "are well advised"* – A 2017 research article *School Functioning and Use of School-Based Accommodations by Treatment-Seeking Anxious Children* by Green and colleagues discusses this concern. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1063426616664328>

Here’s an excerpt;

... More than half of treatment-seeking anxious children and their mothers reported that they received some accommodations in their school. Understanding the nature of these accommodations can be important for school-based mental health providers. For example, a number of cognitive-behavioral interventions for anxiety discourage avoidance/escape and instead aim to support youth in developing adaptive coping skills to use while confronting their anxiety through graduated exposure practices (Pincus & Friedman, 2004; Silverman, Pina, & Viswesvaran, 2008). The current finding that one third of children reported having special permission to leave the classroom when they felt anxious (and almost half of youth involved with IEP/504 plans reported this

accommodation) raises questions about whether school-based supports for anxious youth might inadvertently conflict with clinical best practices. Similarly, anxious youth frequently reported extended time on tests and extended deadlines for assignments. There has been debate over the effectiveness of extended time (Kettler, 2012), with some studies finding that extended time improves student perceptions of the testing experience but not actual test results (Elliott & Marquart, 2004). The range of accommodations reported by students suggests the importance of studies examining the relative effectiveness of school-based accommodations and the dissemination of guidelines to school staff who are involved in selecting and administering accommodations. Importantly, there may be a disconnect between the perceived effectiveness of “accommodating” child anxiety among school personnel (who tend to focus on limiting the extent to which child anxiety interferes with learning) and behavioral therapists (who conceptualize accommodation as playing a key role in maintaining child anxiety in the long term; see Thompson-Hollands, Kerns, Pincus, & Comer, 2014)....

For more, see the links on the Quick Find *Special Education, Accommodation/Inclusion* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/idea.htm>

**Finally, here are some thoughts and resources for discussion:**

- *Maybe the problem needs to be addressed first by minimizing the sources of anxiety.*

Those concerned with enhancing school climate and those focusing on social-emotional learning seem to be moving along this track. See the links on the Quick Find *Classroom/School Climate* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm>

Here are a few examples of our Center resources listed there:

>*Schools as Caring, Learning Communities* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/caring.pdf>

>*About School and Classroom Climate* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolclassroomclimate.pdf>

>*Enhancing Classroom Climate for All Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall11.pdf>

- *And what about ensuring there is a system of supports that minimizes the likelihood that so many students will be overdiagnosed?*

To this end, our research related to mental health in schools and student/learning supports emphasizes establishing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports to address problems such as anxiety (and other barriers to learning and teaching). For an in-depth description, see *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

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**Please let us hear from you**

What do you suggest to address the increasing concerns over student anxiety?

**Share your perspective about this topic!**

**And send it and any other comments to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

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## Why are you anxious?



Because everyone keeps asking me if I'm anxious!

## Links to a few other relevant resources & other topics of concern

*Sorry, There's No Easy Toolkit for Social-Emotional Learning. But It's Worth the Work*  
[https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/01/22/sorry-theres-no-easy-toolkit-for-social-emotional.html?utm\\_source=Psych+Learning+Curve&utm\\_campaign=1c318b270d-roundup-jan-24-2020&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_ff6044c3a5-1c318b270d-174482877](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/01/22/sorry-theres-no-easy-toolkit-for-social-emotional.html?utm_source=Psych+Learning+Curve&utm_campaign=1c318b270d-roundup-jan-24-2020&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_ff6044c3a5-1c318b270d-174482877)

*Rethinking MTSS to Better Address Barriers to Learning*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall19.pdf>

*Kids Depend on Each Other for Self Control*  
[https://arstechnica.com/science/2020/01/new-twist-on-marshmallow-test-kids-depend-on-each-other-for-self-control/?utm\\_source=Psych+Learning+Curve&utm\\_campaign=1c318b270d-roundup-jan-24-2020&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_ff6044c3a5-1c318b270d-174482877](https://arstechnica.com/science/2020/01/new-twist-on-marshmallow-test-kids-depend-on-each-other-for-self-control/?utm_source=Psych+Learning+Curve&utm_campaign=1c318b270d-roundup-jan-24-2020&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_ff6044c3a5-1c318b270d-174482877)

*Response to Intervention: A Summary of the Guidance State Departments of Education Provide to Schools and School Districts*  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00098655.2018.1536641>

*Building Blocks for Learning: A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development*  
<https://www.turnaroundusa.org/what-we-do/tools/building-blocks/>

*Developing Community Schools at Scale: Implementation of the New York City Community Schools Initiative* [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2100.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2100.html)

*Youth, Learning and Social Media in K-12 Education: The State of the Field*  
<https://repository.isls.org/bitstream/1/764/1/42.pdf>

*Caring for Youth with Behavioral Health Needs in the Juvenile Justice System: Improving Knowledge and Skills of the Professionals Who Supervise Them*  
<https://ncyoj.policyresearchinc.org/img/resources/CaringforYouthwithBehavioralHealthNeedsinJJ-946799.pdf>

*The Outsize Influence of Your Middle-School Friends*  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/01/friendship-crucial-adolescent-brain/605638/>

*School lockdown drills pose particular challenges (and risks) for students with disabilities*  
<https://mailchi.mp/9732f97f85b4/school-lockdown-drills-pose-particular-challenges-and-risks-for-students-with-disabilities?e=ad5ca476dc>

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### Request from a Colleague

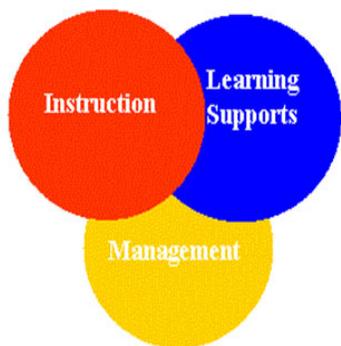
I am part of a research team working on a three-year project at the University of Melbourne called Building Connections, about schools that operate as community hubs. I have read your work about addressing barriers to student learning, and have found it relevant to our project.

We are convening a conference here in Australia in December, and have recently released a call for papers. I was wondering if you could please circulate it among your networks?

For more information, see

<https://research.unimelb.edu.au/learnetwork/projects/building-connections/news/call-for-papers-schools-as-community-hubs-international-conference>

*Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;  
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to  
enabling equity of opportunity, promoting whole child development,  
and enhancing school climate.*



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*For information about the*

***National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports***

*go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>*

*Also online are two related free books*

***Improving School Improvement***

*[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)*

***Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide***

*[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)*

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***THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND  
INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!***

***For new sign-ups – email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)***

***Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.***

***We post a broad range of issues and responses to the Net Exchange  
on our website at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm>  
and on Facebook (access from the Center's home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>)***