

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## A fine balance: Factors that support and hinder academic success for students living with anxiety and mood disorders

By Laura Van Mulligen, RN, BN, MEd, & Catherine Baxter, PhD



### Why this research is important

There is a documented increase in the prevalence of invisible disabilities, specifically anxiety and mood disorders, among university-aged people in Canada ([Government of Canada, 2020](#)). People living with anxiety and mood disorders have reported challenges with completing course requirements, accessing supports and successfully completing post-secondary education ([Kranke et al., 2013](#)). The findings of this research provide a glimpse into the experiences of university students living with anxiety and mood disorders and the factors that hindered and supported their success within the post-secondary environment.

### What you need to know

Eight students living with an anxiety and/or mood disorder share their experiences as they journey through post-secondary education. Through their stories, we gain insights into the challenges they encountered, and the supports and coping skills that contributed to their success.

### How the research was conducted

This qualitative research project used a Grounded Theory Approach to answer three research questions:

- What are the barriers and facilitators to achieving academic success amongst undergraduate students with anxiety and mood disorders?
- What are the interactions between the student living with anxiety and mood disorder and other peers, faculty, and ancillary student services, and how do these interactions impact academic success?
- What are the coping skills that students with anxiety and mood disorders use?

Eight participants took part in this study. The participants were all undergraduate students from a variety of faculties. The participants were interviewed individually using semi-structured questions to gain an understanding of their experiences living with anxiety and mood disorders while attending post-secondary education.

### What the researchers found

Participants described the 'balancing act' of meeting their academic course requirements while living with a mental health diagnosis. Like being on a seesaw, participants described the factors that tipped, restored and maintained the balance between coping and not coping. Participants also described a point or a fulcrum where a pivotal event impacted their mental health positively or negatively.

### How this research can be used

Building a supportive post-secondary environment is essential to reduce barriers and promote success for students living with anxiety and mood disorders. The findings of this research describe the important role that instructors, student supports and institutional policies, play in creating a supportive learning environment. Key considerations for post-secondary education include:

- Programs and supports that assist students preparing for post-secondary education are important. Developing a workshop targeting potential students prior to enrolment that includes information on career counseling, course load demands, and campus supports would be beneficial in preparing students for post-secondary education.
- Instructors play a key role in providing individualized support to students. They must be aware of and willing to direct students to the supports and resources that are available on campus.
- Increased services on campus and in the community are needed to support students living with anxiety and mood disorders adequately. Peer support groups and dedicated spaces for students to gather are important strategies to build connections with others on campus.
- Flexible programming with full-time and part-time options, easier transfer of credit processes between post-secondary institutions and leave of absence policies that allow students to take a 'break' from their studies provide students options to progress through their academic journey following their path to success.

### About the researchers

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### Keywords

Undergraduate students, invisible disabilities, mental health, mental illness, campus supports, student accessibility services, academic success, coping strategies

### Publications based on this research

Van Mulligen, L., & Baxter, C. (2024, April 23-26). *A fine balance: Students with anxiety and mood disorders describe the factors that support and hinder their academic success in post-secondary education*. [Conference presentation]. Mental Health on the Prairies, Brandon, Manitoba, Canada.

Van Mulligen, L., & Baxter, C. (2023, May 29-30). *Factors leading to undergraduate academic success amongst students with anxiety and mood disorders*. [Conference presentation]. Canadian Association Schools of Nursing National Conference, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada.

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