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How to recognize and manage anxiety in the academic context?

UCP2 Mental Health Team
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What are the possible symptoms?

Have you ever received a grade on an exam and thought, “I’m not competent in this subject, I’m not capable”? Or, during a presentation, felt your heart racing and thoughts like, “I won’t manage, I’m going to freeze”?

These situations have something in common: **anxiety**.

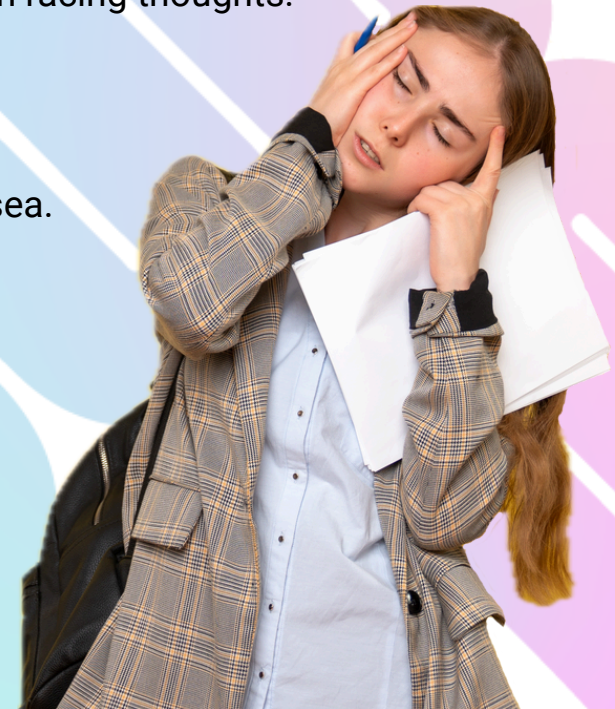
The heart beats faster, breathing becomes shallow, muscles tense, and the stomach feels tight.

It can be difficult to concentrate, and the mind may feel “blank” or flooded with racing thoughts.

Sleep becomes light or interrupted.

There may be irritability, fatigue, and a constant state of alertness.

Sometimes, there is even a sensation of dizziness, warmth, trembling, or nausea.





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But why does this happen?

Anxiety is the **body's automatic response to something it perceives as a threat.**

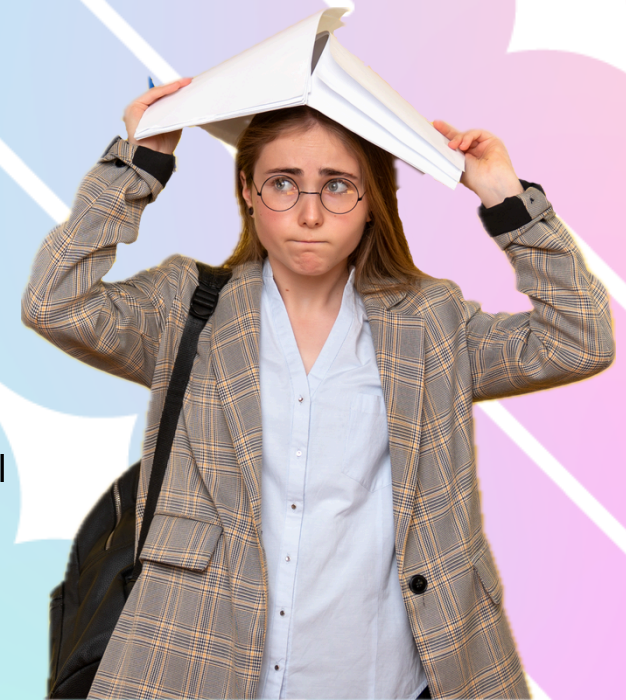
When the brain believes there is danger, it triggers a set of reactions to prepare us to respond. It is our “internal alarm” that has protected us throughout human evolution.

Therefore, as unpleasant as the symptoms may be, they serve a purpose: to help us deal with what we perceive as dangerous.

Sometimes, this reaction is useful – it gives us focus, energy, and motivation.

But other times, the body remains on high alert even when the danger has passed or when the situation does not pose a real threat.

This is when anxiety stops being an ally and starts to threaten our psychological well-being.





What influences anxiety?

The way anxiety manifests results from the interaction between different internal and external factors.

Not all of them can be changed immediately, or completely.

But by recognizing what increases risk and what protects us, we can gradually act on what is within our control and promote our psychological well-being.

Risk Factors

Adverse experiences and stress:

- Traumatic experiences or situations of intense stress.

Risk behaviors:

- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other substances.

External pressures:

- Perceived or real social and economic pressure.

Personal factors:

- High concern with social evaluation.
- Perfectionism and excessive self-criticism.
- Tendency to interpret events negatively.
- Low self-regulation skills (procrastination, poor time management, disorganization).
- Low self-concept as a student.

Protection Factors

Positive experiences and contexts:

- Supportive interpersonal relationships (family, friends, teachers) and safe, stimulating environments.

Healthy behaviors:

- Adequate sleep, healthy diet, regular physical activity, and absence of substance use.

Personal resources:

- Good self-esteem and positive self-concept.
- Ability to manage stress.
- Communication skills.
- Effective self-regulation strategies for learning (organization, time management).
- Clear and realistic academic goals.





Some possible strategies... but they require practice!

1 Postpone worry

One way to cope with anxiety is to set aside a specific time of day (for example, 15 minutes in the late afternoon) to think about your “worries.”

When the thought arises outside of this period, acknowledge the worry and postpone “thinking about it”: “I will specifically think about this issue/worry later, at 5:30 PM, after finishing this task.”

Often, when the scheduled time arrives, the need to worry has already passed, or if it persists, the practice of identifying and managing it has been essential.





Some possible strategies... but they require practice!

2 Challenge negative thoughts

Anxiety increases when we believe our thoughts are facts. Cognitive restructuring helps challenge negative thoughts like “I’m going to fail this exam and will never finish the course” through questions such as:

- “What evidence do I have that this will really happen?”
- “Have there been times when I thought the worst, and it actually turned out well?”
- “What is the worst thing that could happen to me?”

By questioning the thought and considering more rational alternatives, such as “A less positive result does not define my entire academic journey,” we stop perceiving them as absolute truths. This allows us to see the situation more realistically, reducing anxiety levels.

This process requires practice and consistency – but how can we do it? The “**Challenging Negative Thoughts**” worksheet allows us to train this strategy step by step, in a structured way, progressively consolidating more realistic responses to anxious thoughts.





Some possible strategies... but they require practice!

3 Diaphragmatic Breathing

The body also needs to learn how to exit the state of alert.

This simple yet very effective technique helps reduce anxiety through slow inhalation through the nose and exhalation through the mouth, paying attention to the movement of the abdomen, rising and falling.

By focusing on the breath and the movement of the abdomen, the body relearns how to release stress and regain balance.

The “**Diaphragmatic Breathing**” worksheet allows you to practice this technique step by step. With regular practice, the goal is to be able to apply it routinely throughout the day, anywhere, making it a simple and practical tool for managing anxiety.





What support and resources are available at Católica?

Dealing with anxiety can be challenging. On campus, there are several ways to strengthen your protective factors and take care of your well-being:

1. Engagement in activities that promote mental health

Participate in extracurricular activities, volunteering, sports, and more to develop integration, social support, and a sense of community.

Learn more

Participate in workshops on anxiety and academic anxiety management, through the Pro•Stress Course, to learn practical techniques for managing stress and anxiety. Learn more

2. Psychological Support

UCP2 Mental Health provides individual psychological support for students at all four *campi*.

Learn More

This service is also available for faculty and staff at the Braga, Lisbon, and Viseu *campi*.

Learn More





References

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Challenging negative thoughts

Objective: to identify negative thoughts and replace them with alternative rational thoughts.

Situation

What happened?

Emotion

What did you feel and with what intensity (0–100%)?

Negative Thought

What thought arose?

Is there any pattern (e.g., catastrophizing*, overgeneralization**)?

Analysis

What evidence supports this thought?

What “evidence” do I have?

Alternative Rational Thought

How can you reframe it more realistically?

How do you feel now (0–100%)?

💡 Practical Tip:

It is not always possible to change a thought immediately.
The goal is to see the situation more clearly, not to force optimism.
And don't forget, challenging negative thoughts requires practice.

***Catastrophizing:** a cognitive distortion characterized by the tendency to anticipate and exaggerate the negative consequences of a situation, imagining scenarios much worse than the most likely outcomes.

****Overgeneralization:** a cognitive distortion characterized by the tendency to draw a broad conclusion from a single event, assuming that something that happened once will occur in all similar situations.

