

Anxiety's Hidden Cost

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The effect of anxiety on academic performance is not always obvious but new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council suggests that there may be hidden costs. The research found that anxious individuals find it harder to avoid distractions and take more time to turn their attention from one task to the next than their less anxious peers.

The researchers, Professor Michael Eysenck and Dr Nazanin Derkshan, designed several experiments to explore the effects of anxiety on our ability to perform tasks such as avoiding distractions on a computer screen, when reading a story, or solving a series of simple mathematics problems.

According to Professor Eysenck, these findings have clear practical implications in the classroom:

"A lot of the negative effects of anxiety appear to be caused by difficulties with controlling attention. This suggests that training techniques designed to enhance attentional control - the ability to ignore distractions and to switch attention from one task to another - could help anxious students to achieve their academic potential," he explains.

In addition, the study showed that anxious individuals often perform at a comparable level to non-anxious ones but only do so at a greater cost in terms of effort or perhaps long term stress.

"This shows that it is important that teachers focus not only on whether a student's academic performance seems to be OK but also on how much effort the student had to put in to achieve that level. Anxious students may be trying desperately hard just to keep up and this could be at great psychological cost," says Professor Eysenck.

In one of these experiments, participants' eye movements were recorded as they read a story that included a few 'distracter' words that were unrelated to the story. The researchers found that anxious participants took longer to read the story because they tended to dwell on the irrelevant words, particularly when they thought that their comprehension would be evaluated by others

In another experiment, participants performed two arithmetical tasks such as multiplication and division either in separate blocks (all the problems requiring multiplication grouped together and kept separate from the division problems) or with one task alternating with the other.

In this experiment, anxiety levels did not appear to affect the number of correct answers given but anxious participants took longer to complete the task, particularly when they had to keep switching from one type of mathematical calculation to another.

Overall, the experiments showed that anxiety had more effect on how much effort it took to perform a task than on how well the task was actually performed. In other words, anxiety often produced "hidden costs" that were not apparent in performance.

Source:
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