



Social anxiety: how to take it into account in teaching?

Päivystävä pedagogi, 4.3.2022
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Our topics today...

- What is social anxiety / stress reaction? (jännittäminen, sosiaalinen ahdistus, stressi)
- How does it typically show up in learning/studying?
- How can we take into account social phobia in teaching?
- Discussion: social anxiety and returning to campus



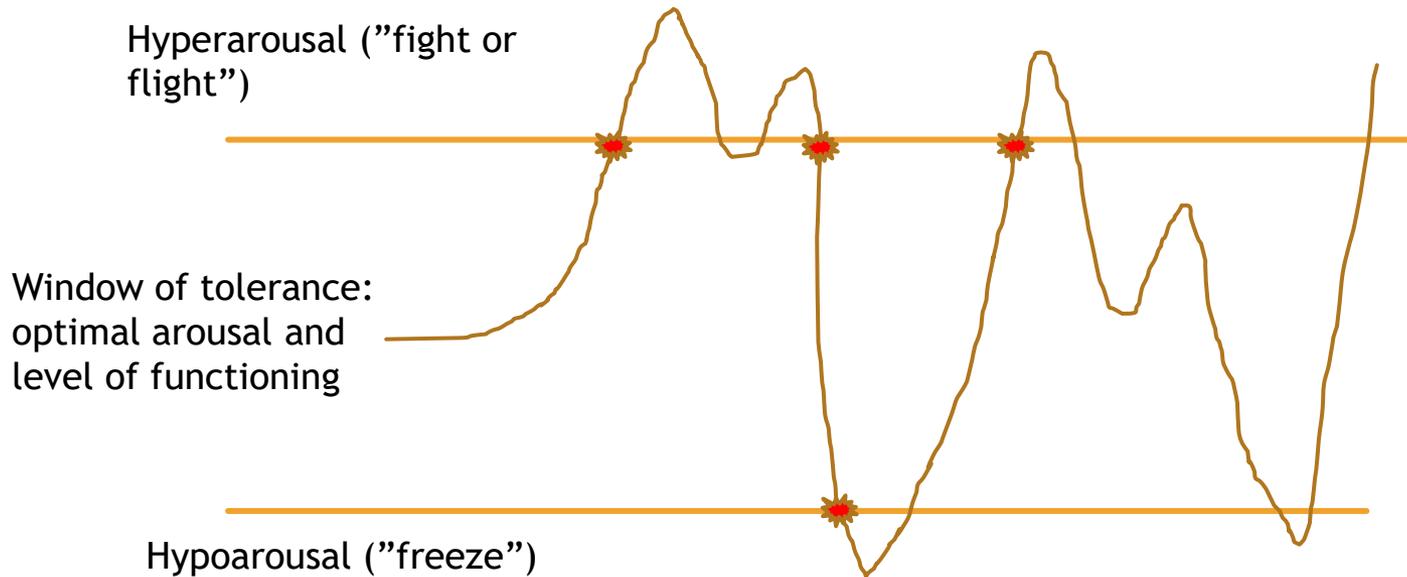
Anxiety: a stress reaction

- ▶ Stress reaction:
 - ▶ Physiological arousal
 - ▶ Fight or flight - or freeze
 - ▶ Focus on survival (body and mind)





The window of stress tolerance





What happens in the brain?

- ▶ Small amount of stress improves performance and functioning through certain neurotransmitter responses in the frontal lobes. If the stress is excessive, too intense or prolonged, or we face a significant sense of threat performance and functioning deteriorates. (Arnsten, 2015.)
- ▶ The same happens if we are hypoaroused: we cannot function in a higher cognitive level (cortical functioning decreases), because the goal number one of the body and mind is to survive; logical thinking does not work properly.



How does anxiety show up in studies?

- ▶ Difficulties participating in group work (absence, dropping out)
- ▶ Absence from lectures or other studies
- ▶ Dropping out of courses that contain interaction with others
- ▶ Avoidance behavior, eg.
 - ▶ difficulties contacting teachers/supervisor
 - ▶ fear of asking "stupid" questions
- ▶ Underachievement in studies



Need for safety, predictability and of being accepted

- We all have a need to be part of the community and feel connection
- We all are afraid not to be accepted in our community

3/4/2022

Photo by Shane Rounce on Unsplash

www.helsinki.fi/yliopisto

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Pedagogical ways to support students

- ▶ The teacher divides students into small groups
- ▶ Maintaining the same small groups throughout the course
- ▶ Give time for students to get to know each other
- ▶ Reserving time for small exercises to interact in the lecture or in the small group
- ▶ Help students to become part of a group
 - ▶ Provide clear instructions: What is the aim of the group work?
 - ▶ Dividing roles in group work:
<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/scienced/ongelmanratkaisuryhmassa/>



Short

- ▶ mentalization exercise



Discussion

- ▶ Students are returning to campus
- ▶ The amount of contact teaching will increase
- ▶ Many students are unfamiliar to contact teaching and the change of teaching setting and methods may lead into heightened sense of uncertainty and unsafety among students
- ▶ Some students will have a greater need of support due to their social anxiety

How to take this into account in teaching? What could help relieve the anxiety of returning to campus?



Student perspective (HYY)

The university community can feel strange and distant after a long period of remote studies

- ❖ Some students have studied only remotely, thus making participation in contact teaching difficult. Many can feel nervous since they do not know any of the other students
- ❖ For this reason, questions, that are suddenly presented to a specific student, can lead to strong feelings of anxiety
- ❖ Even talking during a lecture can feel difficult and anxiety-provoking
- ❖ For the aforementioned reasons, it is important to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere in class

Important to think about the ways in which group work is arranged

- ❖ Is it better for the teacher to create the small groups beforehand, or let the students do it by themselves?
- ❖ There are good and bad sides in both alternatives. Pre-made groups can help prevent feelings of being left outside, but working together with complete strangers can also be difficult and lead to feelings of anxiety
- ❖ One good method could be to register to small groups Moodle, so nobody is left alone



Study psychologists tips

1. **Normalize** – We are all in a new situation, which evokes a wide range of emotions. It is normal to feel nervous and anxious.
 2. **Share what is going to happen in class and what is expected from the students.** Not everybody has participated in contact teaching, so many things can be new, nothing is self-evident. It can feel scary to go to a new situation, where you do not know how to act. Instructions are needed. Think about what you could tell your students eg. during your first lecture together.
 3. **Increase interaction little by little. Give time for students to get to know each other.** Interaction can be practiced eg. by using technical support tools (eg. Flinga, discussion forum in Moodle). Could the beginning of course include small and simple discussion assignments, that do not require prior knowledge? When the content of the discussion assignment is simple, students do not have to worry about having to be “right” or to make mistakes.
 4. **Divide students in small groups.** Do not leave this up to the students.
 5. **Formulate some ground rules together with the students on how to collaborate.** How do we interact and give feedback to each other? How do we wish to discuss and communicate? How do we make sure to speak appreciatively to one another? What kind of role sharing can support group work? What does constructive feedback look like? What kind of feedback supports learning?
- ▶ More ideas and tips on how to support a sense of communality (*note: only in Finnish*)
<https://www.nyyti.fi/hankkeet/yhdessayhteisoksi/>



When more support is needed

- ▶ **Staff:** Instructions for teaching → Search: 'Study psychologist'
- ▶ <https://teaching.helsinki.fi/en/article/challenging-supervision-situations>
- ▶ opintopsykologi@helsinki.fi
- ▶ **Students:** Instructions for students → Search: 'Study psychologist'
 - ▶ <https://studies.helsinki.fi/instructions/article/study-psychologist-services-students>
- ▶ Individual arrangements
 - ▶ <https://teaching.helsinki.fi/instructions/article/special-arrangements>
 - ▶ <https://teaching.helsinki.fi/instructions/article/recommendations-teachers-concerning-special-situations>
 - ▶ <https://studies.helsinki.fi/instructions/article/special-arrangements-support-studies>