

Sociopolitical Crisis as a Predictor of Students' Anxiety toward Schooling in the University of Bamenda

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ABSTRACT

The sociopolitical crisis in the Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest) of Cameroon has impacted the mental health of students and exacerbated the prevalence of anxiety among them. The purpose of this study is to explore how sociopolitical crisis predict students' anxiety towards schooling in the University of Bamenda. The study was based on the premise that University students often come with a replete of anxiety during this sociopolitical crisis that often lead to psychological breakdown. The purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 140 students. The instrument used to collect data was the questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using the Spearman's correlation test. The findings revealed that sociopolitical crisis in Bamenda ($P\text{-value}=0.048<0.05$) affected students' psychological wellbeing due to anxiety. It was concluded that sociopolitical crisis has a significant explanatory power over students' anxiety towards schooling making them academically stressed up and others have less interest in school.

KEYWORDS: *Sociopolitical Crisis, Students' Anxiety, University of Bamenda*

Introduction and background of the study

This paper looks at the Anglophone (sociopolitical) crisis in the Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest) of Cameroon and its implications to students' anxiety towards schooling in the University of Bamenda. Framing a response to the disaster is usually complicated by high levels of public and students' anxiety which can themselves become a political issue. The crisis in the Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest) of Cameroon that began on the 21st of November 2016 with protests by teachers and lawyers escalated into an armed insurrection at the end of 2017 and has since degenerated into a civil war (ADF Claims, 2017). The conflict has killed at least 1,850 people since September 2017 and has now spread to the Francophone West and Littoral regions. It has had a substantial social and humanitarian impact in the Anglophone regions: most schools have been closed for the last two years; more than 170 villages have been destroyed; 530,000 people have been internally displaced and 35,000 have sought refuge in

neighbouring Nigeria. The conflict has also devastated the local economy, which accounts for about one fifth of the country's national income (Anglophone Crisis group, 2019).

A sociopolitical crisis defines a situation where the pursuit of specific objectives or a failure to satisfy certain demands by different parties leads to high levels of political, social or military mobilization and/or the use of violence that does not reach the level of armed conflict and may include fighting, repression, coups d'état, bombings or attacks which led to the development of anxiety in students towards schooling in these regions. If escalated, these situations could degenerate into an armed conflict under certain circumstances. Tensions are normally linked to: a) demands for self-determination and self-government, or identity issues; b) opposition to the political, economic, social or ideological system of a State, or the internal or international policies of a government, which in both cases produces a struggle

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to take or erode power; or c) control over the resources or the territory.

According to Akame and Croquette (2021), the sociopolitical crisis in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon, has led to violent clashes between armed forces, loss of lives and property, internal displacement and a growing climate of fear and incertitude especially among students. During these clashes schools have been regularly attacked by armed groups, and tragically this has led to the loss of lives and the horrific traumatisation of many children and teachers. Meanwhile, schools and school pupils/students have continued to be subjects of attack and violence as of November 2020. Defiance of calls for school boycott and other lockdown measures have led to repercussions. Students, teachers, and infrastructures of schools accused of 'violating the boycott' have been targeted. In addition, confrontations between NSAGs and state security forces around the vicinity of schools have sometimes led to casualties and caused trauma to pupils and students (Akame and Croquette, 2021).

Anxiety is an emotion which usually involves an element of worry and fear. It is a state of mind but can also affect our thoughts, behaviours and physical reactions in our body. Although anxiety can be unpleasant, it is actually an evolutionary survival mechanism. When we find ourselves in dangerous or stressful situations, anxiety helps us by preparing our body to either run away or fight back. This is known as the "fight versus flight" response. Mental Health foundation (2014) confirm this and posits that, Anxiety is one of a range of emotions that serves the positive function of alerting us to things we might need to worry about: things that are potentially harmful.

Although anxiety can help us survive, it can start to become a problem when we use the fight versus flight response when there is no need. Anxiety is natural and helpful in dangerous or stressful situations but becomes a problem when we experience anxiety when we are not in a dangerous or stressful situation or long after a dangerous or stressful situation has passed. Researchers review that the emotion anxiety help us to evaluate potential threats and respond to them an appropriate way, perhaps by quickening our reflexes or focusing our attention (Mental Health foundation, 2014).

Beauvais and Oetting (1999) theorised promotive factors that can help students avoid the negative effects of stress to either assets or resources. Assets are the positive factors that reside within the individuals, such as competence, coping skills, and self-efficacy (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Resources

are also positive factors that help students overcome risk, but they are external to the individual. Resources include parental support, adult mentoring, or community organizations that reduces anxiety on students (Beauvais & Oetting, 1999).

Elliot and Gramling (1990) found that resilience helps students to lessen depression, anxiety, stress and psychological problems which have a significant impact on their development and achievement. According to Elliot and Gramling (1990), individuals who adapt very well despite facing risks and individuals who end up in maladaptation is the existence of protective factors. Thus, enhancing both internal and external protective factors of students may help them adapt to stressful and risky life situations like sociopolitical crisis. For internal protective factors, research findings have shown that optimism, perceptions of control, self-efficacy, and active coping are associated with better health and low anxiety towards schooling (Smith, 2002).

The most influential theory of stress and anxiety is that which was developed by social-personality psychologist, Richard Lazarus. The Cognitive Transactional Model of Stress, proposed by Lazarus and his colleagues (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) remains one of the most influential theories of stress to date. According to Lazarus, anxiety is a result of a transaction between an individual's characteristics and appraisals, the event environment and the internal or external responses available to the person (Morrison and Bennett, 2009).

Lazarus argued that the stress response was elicited when the individual appraised a potentially stressful event as being stressful (Ogden, 2004). In his theory Lazarus emphasizes the influence appraisals have on our perceived stress and suggests that the interpretation of stressful events is more important than the events themselves. For example a student who appraises an upcoming exam as being stressful is likely to have higher stress levels than a student who considers the same exam as an opportunity to shine. This difference in stress levels is due to the way the students are appraising the upcoming situation. Lazarus' cognitive transactional model of stress consists of two types of appraisals; Primary Appraisal and Secondary Appraisal (Beauvais & Oetting, 1999).

Review of literature

Sociopolitical crisis and students' anxiety towards schooling

Since the outbreak of the Anglophone sociopolitical crisis in Cameroon in late 2016, schools have been systematically and deliberately targeted, either overtly or allegedly, by pro-independence fighters/separatists. At first, the strategy was to call for school boycott by

children, with threats and attacks on anybody who dared to go to school. Later, the strategy evolved to directly attacking and burning down schools, or invading schools with arms and forcefully sending everybody home, causing a lot of hysteria. Recently, the attacks on schools have evolved to the breaking into schools by unidentified armed persons and kidnapping of children in huge numbers, either for ransom or to create panic. In some instances, both separatists and government have accused each other for being responsible, though government practically remains in control of these zones, evoking the need for investigation and accountability.

This atmosphere of terror surrounding schools in the English-speaking part of Cameroon has seriously handicapped education of children in that part of the country, with effects felt even in the French-speaking part. Schools in the English-speaking part witnessed intermittent interruptions, apparently for as long as the separatists want it to be, especially as they accompany their moves with threats. Also, school children go on campus and study with fear, as there could be sporadic attacks. Worse-still, a lot of schools have practically shut down, because of attacks or fear of attacks. Sadly, while thousands of children have relocated to the French-speaking part of the country to pursue education, there is massive overcrowding in schools in many of these communities. This therefore undermines the quality and effectiveness of teaching and services in schools accommodating these displaced children, while some students just do not see the need for them to go school when, according to them, there is no hope for children and young people in the country.

Anxiety is an adaptive response generated by environmental stressful situations that activate alarm mechanisms in the individual to assure survival. This emotion is a series of biochemical changes in the brain and body, which makes the heart to beat faster due to an increase in adrenaline, and feeling less pain due to a decrease in cerebral dopamine. However, if the state of anxiety is not adequately affronted or it is produced by an inexistent stimulus in the long term, natural anxiety is now converted into an anxiety disorder. In this way, natural anxiety is beneficial for the individual but if the level of anxiety is exceeded, it deteriorates the habitual activity of the organism; in this case, higher anxiety produces a lower efficiency of the individual. In human beings, anxiety disorders are characterized by excessive fear and distress in the absence of real danger, that is to say, an excessive preoccupation, fatigue, problems of sleeping or concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, aggressive behavior, vulnerability sensation, surveillance

exacerbation, and exaggerated emotional reactions to danger.

American Psychiatric Association (2013) expounded that Anxiety disorders, for example Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), constitute a state of persistent and excessive anxiety or worry that is difficult to control, associated with physical symptoms (e.g., restlessness, fatigue, muscle tension, and insomnia) and changes in cognition and mood (e.g., impaired concentration and irritability) that cause significant distress and dysfunction.

Anxiety causes real emotional distress which can cause someone to becoming unwell and, at worst, develops anxiety disorders such as panic attacks. Anxiety at this level can have a truly distressing and debilitating impact on our lives and impact on our physical, mental health and concentration on education. Hagell et al., (2013) confirms this view and concluded that such “mental health problems (anxiety) have important implications for every aspect of young people’s lives including their ability to engage with education, make and keep friends, engage in constructive family relationships and make their own way in the world.

Good (2007) opined that people are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety when current events are worrisome, stressful, or otherwise uncertain, especially on a large scale. Preceding and following the sociopolitical crisis, for example, many mental health providers noted an increase in anxiety in people seeking treatment, both those who had a history of anxiety and those who did not. People reported feeling highly stressed up about the event which made them to experience fear, anger, uncertainty, and mistrust. Worry about current events also often leads people to check news and social media sites more frequently out of a desire to stay informed. This increased vigilance may, however, have the unintended consequence of increasing worry and can also lead to insomnia and other issues.

METHOD

The study was a descriptive survey and was made up of 140 participants who were University students purposively and randomly selected from the University of Bamenda. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to include participants who demonstrated a range of characteristics of anxiety; meanwhile random sampling was further used to select a number that was demographically representative and also sizable enough for the study. The instrument used was a questionnaire which was designed to collect data on sociopolitical crisis as a predictor of students’ attitude towards schooling in the University of Bamenda. Data was collected using

a questionnaire (self-report anxiety inventory) to determine students' anxiety level. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts; demographic concerns and students' anxiety level.

Some measures of sociopolitical crisis as an independent variable were defined as abstract thought, ability to cope with this crisis, level of drinking as adaptability strategy, argument about the crisis, difficulty in sleeping, poor appetite for food, post-traumatic stress, bereavement due to the crisis, phobias, chronic pain and tunnel vision. Anxiety behavior of students were defined as faster heart beat when they think about school, feeling anxious about school, physical tension about school, dizziness, scared when that word school is mentioned, feeling of nervousness when attending classes, thinking about withdrawal from school, suicidal thinking, depression, irritated feelings and many absences from school.

Before using the instrument to collect data, there was a validity and reliability check. A pilot test was conducted using 20 students who were not part of the sample selected. The reliability analysis report for the instrument was not violated for the conceptual component/variable with Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient values of 0.642 with an integrated value mapping of 0.712. When the Cronbach alpha values of the final instrument were compared with that of the pre-test instrument, a significant improvement was observed among the student responses justified with a relatively high Cronbach Alpha Coefficient values. The overall reliability analysis of the instrument (IVM) was 0.712. Generally, when the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient value is above 0.5 especially in a context where the test items to some extent are directly related to one another as it was the case in the

context of this study, the instrument is considered valid and reliable for analysis

Before exiting to the field, an authorization letter was obtained from the head of department to enable the researchers to access participants. Permission was sought from all necessary authorities before administering the instrument. Questionnaires were administered and collected on the spot.

All questionnaires were entered into, a pre-designed EpiData Version 3.1 (EpiData Association, Odense Denmark, 2008) database which has an in-built consistency and validation checks was used to enter the data which was coded using serial numbers. The essence of this coding of each test item and questionnaire before data entering was to ensure easy cross verification of the data set based on the individual responses of the respondents if the need for cross verification arises. Further consistency, data range and validation checks were performed in SPSS version 21.0 (IBM Inc., 2012) to identify invalid codes (data cleaning). The quantitative data was analyzed using both the descriptive and inferential statistics using the SPSS version 21.0. The descriptive statistical tools used were frequency count and percentages. The Chi-square test which was inferential statistical test was used to compare students' perceptions of the conceptual components against demographic information to appraise for significance differences. Moreover, the hypothesis of the study was tested using a non-parametric test, the Spearman Rho because the data for all the variables were not approximately normally distributed. That is the data did not follow the normal distribution pattern which was computed using advanced tests such as Shapiro-Wilk test or the Komogorov test of significance as seen on the table of test of normality below with significance value all <0.05 .

FINDINGS

Table 1: Appreciation of student's anxiety toward schooling

Test items	Stretched				Collapsed	
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	SA/A	D/SD
I always have faster heart beat when I think about school	83 (59.3%)	41 (29.3%)	9 (6.4%)	7 (5.0%)	124 (88.6%)	16 (11.4%)
I am always anxious now about school than ever	86 (61.4%)	52 (37.1%)	2 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	138 (98.6%)	2 (1.4%)
I always have physical tension when going to school	111 (79.9%)	27 (19.4%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)	138 (99.3%)	1 (0.7%)
Dizziness is always part of my daily activities	24 (17.1%)	63 (45.0%)	46 (32.9%)	7 (5.0%)	87 (62.1%)	53 (37.9%)
I am always scared when that word school is mention	30 (21.4%)	74 (52.9%)	31 (22.1%)	5 (3.6%)	104 (74.3%)	36 (25.7%)
I always feel nervous when attending classes	18 (12.9%)	93 (66.9%)	25 (18.0%)	3 (2.2%)	111 (79.9%)	28 (20.1%)

I feel like withdrawing from school when I hear gunshot	24 (17.1%)	63 (45.0%)	47 (33.6%)	6 (4.3%)	87 (62.1%)	53 (37.9%)
I always think of committing suicide due to gunshot beside campus	43 (30.7%)	75 (53.6%)	12 (8.6%)	10 (7.1%)	118 (84.3%)	22 (15.7%)
I am always depressed when going to school	55 (39.3%)	62 (44.3%)	17 (12.1%)	6 (4.3%)	117 (83.6%)	23 (16.4%)
I am always irritated in school whenever I hear gun shot	69 (49.3%)	62 (44.3%)	6 (4.3%)	3 (2.1%)	131 (93.6%)	9 (6.4%)
Multiple response set (MRS)	543 (38.8%)	612 (43.8%)	195 (13.9%)	48 (3.4%)	1155 (82.6%)	243 (17.4%)

Generally, findings show that majority of the students in University of Bamenda (82.6%) have high anxiety toward schooling while (17.4%) of them have low anxiety toward schooling. The figure below presents the summary of findings on University student anxiety level.

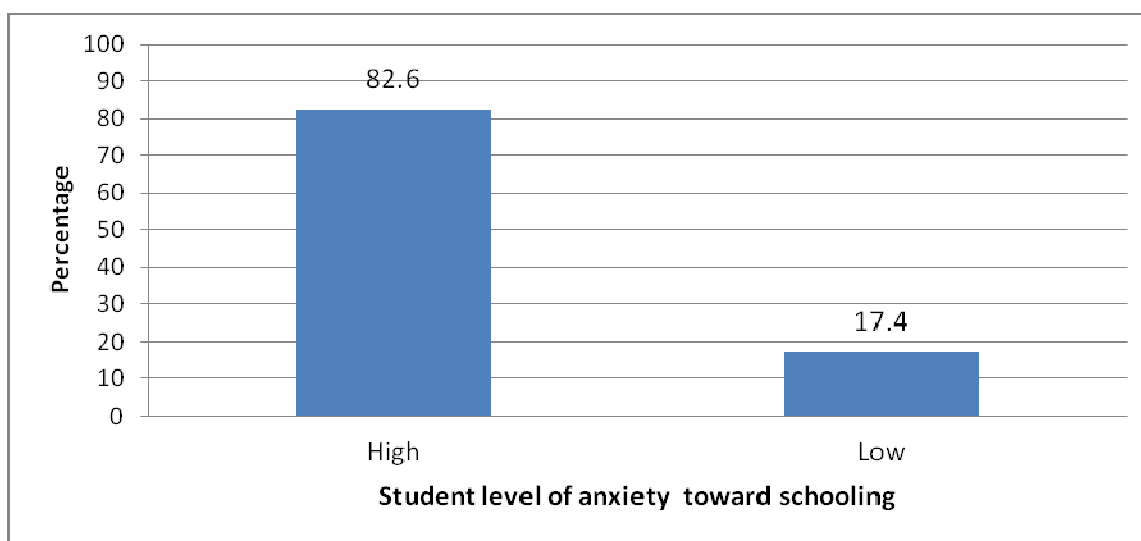


Figure 1: Summary of findings on students' level of anxiety

Table 2: Comparing students' anxiety by demographic characteristics

Demographic variables			Adolescent moral development		Total based on response	Chi-Square test (χ^2)
			High	Low		
Gender	Male	n	569	130	699	$\chi^2=0.20$ df=1 P=0.653
		%	81.4%	18.6%		
	Female	n	586	113	699	
		%	83.8%	16.2%		
Age range	11-15	n	133	26	159	$\chi^2=0.15$ df=2 P=0.927
		%	83.6%	16.4%		
	16-20	n	956	203	1159	
		%	82.5%	17.5%		
	20 and above	n	66	14	80	
		%	82.5%	17.5%		
Religion	Christian	n	1122	236	1358	$\chi^2=0.01$ df=1 P=0.998
		%	82.6%	17.4%		
	Muslim	n	33	7	40	
		%	82.5%	17.5%		

When student anxiety level was compared by their demographic characteristics, findings show that irrespective of their gender, age range and religion, majority of them were found to have high anxiety level. However, although their anxiety level did not significantly differ by their demographic characteristics ($P>0.05$), with reference to gender, female students were slightly higher in their anxiety level (83.8%) than male (81.4%).

Objective one: Sociopolitical crisis as a predictor of students' anxiety towards schooling in the University of Bamenda**Table 3: Students opinion of sociopolitical crisis and of students' anxiety towards schooling**

Test items	Stretched				Collapsed	
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	SA/A	D/SD
Sometimes i always think something bad is going to happen	53 (37.9%)	81 (57.9%)	6 (4.3%)	0 (0.0%)	134 (95.7%)	6 (4.3%)
I always think that I will not be able to cope with this crisis	41 (29.3%)	72 (51.4%)	21 (15.0%)	6 (4.3%)	113 (80.7%)	27 (19.3%)
My level of drinking has increase to adapt to the current situation	25 (18.0%)	87 (62.6%)	19 (13.7%)	8 (5.7%)	112 (80.6%)	27 (19.4%)
I always found myself arguing about this crisis	22 (15.7%)	95 (67.9%)	21 (15.0%)	2 (1.4%)	117 (83.6%)	23 (16.4%)
I have difficulties sleeping	27 (19.4%)	60 (43.2%)	50 (36.0%)	2 (1.4%)	87 (62.6%)	52 (37.4%)
I have poor appetite due to the crises	33 (23.9%)	70 (50.0%)	26 (18.8%)	10 (7.2%)	102 (73.9%)	36 (26.1%)
I am suffering from post-Traumatic Stress	24 (17.4%)	53 (38.4%)	45 (32.6%)	16 (11.6%)	77 (55.8%)	61 (44.2%)
I am bereave due to this crisis	39 (27.9%)	71 (50.7%)	27 (19.3%)	3 (2.1%)	110 (78.6%)	30 (21.4%)
I develop some Phobias from the crisis	34 (24.6%)	66 (47.8%)	31 (22.5%)	7 (5.1%)	100 (72.5%)	38 (27.5%)
I have some chronic pain	14 (10.0%)	51 (36.4%)	46 (32.9%)	29 (20.7%)	65 (46.4%)	75 (53.6%)
Multiple response set (MRS)	312 (22.4%)	705 (50.6%)	292 (21.0%)	83 (5.9%)	1017 (73.1%)	375 (26.9%)

Generally, findings showed that majority of the students (73.1%) were of the opinion that sociopolitical crisis makes students to developed negative anxiety towards schooling in the University of Bamenda while (26.9%) of the students disagreed.

There was no significant relationship between sociopolitical crises and students' anxiety towards schooling.

Table 4: Relationship between sociopolitical crisis and students' anxiety towards schooling

Correlations			
Spearman's rho		Sociopolitical crisis	Students' anxiety
	Correlation Coefficient (R-value)	1.000	.211*
	P-value		.048
	N	140	140

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Statistically, there was a significant and positive relationship between sociopolitical crisis and students' anxiety towards schooling (P-value=0.048<0.05). The positive sign of the correlation value (R=0.211*) implied that students' negative attitude towards schooling was more likely when they experience sociopolitical crisis. The null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship

between sociopolitical crisis and students' anxiety towards schooling was rejected and the alternative that there is a significant relationship sociopolitical crisis and students' anxiety towards schooling was retained.

Discussion of findings

According to research question which seeks to find out how sociopolitical crisis influences students'

anxiety towards schooling in the University of Bamenda, results reveal that there was a positive sign of the correlation value between sociopolitical crisis and students' anxiety towards schooling which implied that students' negative attitude towards schooling was more likely to occur when they experience the negative effects of the sociopolitical crisis each day of their lives. This implies that students think negatively about school, have physical tension, feel dizzy and scared when going to school. They feel uncomfortable hearing the word "school" and nervous when attending classes which makes most of the students to have a negative thinking about school such as withdrawal from school, Suicidal thinking and irritated feelings towards schooling. These caused many students to be depressed leading to many absences from school. This is in congruence with Good (2007) who opined that people are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety when current events are worrisome, stressful, or otherwise uncertain, especially on a large scale.

This is also in correspondence with Masten, Best and Garnezy (1990) and Lewis (1999) who argued that students who display resilience in time of crisis by coping and adapting in all problems always find it easy to succeed in life. This also agrees with Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins (2004) who opined that students who can succeed in crisis are always less stressful thereby given them healthy development. Grotberg (1999) also argued that students who display resilience in sociopolitical crisis always overcome their initial traumatic life experiences, such as growing up in families with a mentally ill member, being abused, or having criminally involved parents. Thus, cultivating resilience is an important way to promote the psychological and social development of students. This ties with Marcial (1980) theory that holds that adolescents who have gone through the identity crisis and come out with a well-defined self-concept, who are committed to a set of personal values, beliefs and goals have reached the state of identity achievement.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of sociopolitical crises on students' anxiety towards schooling. The findings revealed that sociopolitical crisis in the South West and North Region influences students' anxiety towards schooling negatively in the University of Bamenda.

Notwithstanding, Elliot and Gramling (1990) found that students' adaptation in sociopolitical crisis helps adolescent students to lessen depression, anxiety, stress and psychological problems which have a significant impact on their achievement. According to

Elliot and Gramling (1990), individuals who adapt very well despite facing risks and individuals who end up in maladaptation is the existence of protective factors. Thus, enhancing both internal and external protective factors of students may help them adapt to stressful and risky life situations. To help prevent anxiety from becoming a concern, teach all students positive self-talk to regulate attention, thoughts and emotions. The best way to teach these skills to all students is through an evidence-based program such as second step or Mind Up. In these programs all students learn ways to develop emotion regulation through diaphragmatic breathing, accurately identifying feelings and problem-solving skills to handle challenge. By encouraging all students to focus on positive emotions like happiness and teaching them that kindness and compassion make both the giver and receiver more positive, you can help them cope with anxiety.

Additionally, teach students the benefits of mindfulness, staying in the moment without judging, to cope with stress and anxiety. Often imagery and metaphors are used with mindfulness (e.g., thoughts and feelings are like clouds that appear and float away). Many students benefit from being taught some grounding techniques such as simply observing their immediate surroundings with all their senses (e.g., name five things you can see right now). Another helpful strategy is to self-monitor anxiety on a simple scale from 1-10 or a feeling thermometer to assess what triggers high levels of anxiety and what coping tools help bring the anxiety to an acceptable level. Some students are helped by being taught to externalize the anxiety.

Because anxiety is an internalizing behavior it can remain hidden or undetected for a long time. By collaborating with students, parents, nurses, teachers, administrators and community mental health providers you can maximize the probability of identifying students with high levels of anxiety and providing a supportive environment for them to practice new ways of coping with anxiety and stress.

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