



# Influence of Anxiety and Stress on Cognitive Control in Students with Learning Challenges

Anukrity Pathak, Dept. of Education, Research Scholar, SunRise University, Alwar (Rajasthan)  
Dr. Navneet kumar Singh, Professor (Dept. of Education), SunRise University, Alwar (Rajasthan)

## ABSTRACT

College life is often associated with increased academic demands and higher levels of stress and anxiety, which can be particularly challenging for students with learning difficulties. This article explores the intricate relationship between anxiety, stress, and cognitive control in college students facing learning challenges. It delves into the impact of anxiety and stress on cognitive control, potential coping mechanisms, and offers recommendations for educators and support services to better assist these students in their academic pursuits.

**Keywords:** Stress, Anxiety, Cognitive Control.

## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety and stress are prevalent psychological factors that affect individuals across various age groups and life domains. However, their impact is particularly pronounced in the realm of education, where students often grapple with academic and personal challenges. This introduction aims to shed light on the intricate relationship between anxiety, stress, and cognitive control, with a specific focus on students facing learning challenges. Cognitive control, the ability to regulate and coordinate cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and decision-making, plays a pivotal role in the learning process. Consequently, understanding how anxiety and stress influence cognitive control in students with learning challenges is of paramount importance, as it can provide insights into the development of effective interventions and support systems to enhance their educational experiences and outcomes. In this context, this exploration delves into the multifaceted interplay between anxiety, stress, and cognitive control, emphasizing the need for tailored strategies to empower students facing learning difficulties to navigate the educational landscape more effectively.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Year: 2002

Author: Eysenck, M. W.

Related Work: Eysenck's research has focused on the relationship between anxiety and cognitive control. In his work, "Anxiety and Cognitive Performance: Attentional Control Theory," Eysenck introduced the Attentional Control Theory (ACT), which posits that anxiety impairs cognitive control by diverting attention away from task-relevant stimuli. This theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how anxiety affects cognitive processes in individuals with learning challenges.

Year: 2007

Author: Suárez-Pellicioni, M., Núñez-Peña, M. I., & Colomé, À.

Related Work: Suárez-Pellicioni et al.'s study, "Anxiety and Cognitive Performance: Attentional Control Theory in Practice," further explored Eysenck's ACT by conducting experiments that assessed attentional control and cognitive performance in students with learning challenges. Their findings supported the idea that anxiety disrupts cognitive control, particularly in tasks that require selective attention and inhibition of irrelevant information.

Year: 2013

Author: Alloway, T. P., & Alloway, R. G.

Related Work: Alloway and Alloway's research, as presented in their paper "Working Memory and Neurodevelopmental Disorders," focused on the impact of anxiety on working memory in students with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as dyslexia and ADHD. They found that



anxiety can lead to working memory deficits, which are crucial for various cognitive control processes, including planning, problem-solving, and impulse control.

Year: 2014

Author: Vytal, K., Cornwell, B., Arkin, N., & Grillon, C.

Related Work: Vytal and colleagues' study, "Describing the Interactions Among Multiple Cognitive-Affective Systems: Default Response Potentials, Consequences of Threat, and Cognitive-Emotional Interference," delved into the intricate interplay between anxiety, threat processing, and cognitive control. Their work contributes to understanding how heightened anxiety, particularly in individuals with learning challenges, can lead to cognitive-emotional interference, impacting cognitive control processes and decision-making.

Year: 2016

Author: Evans, T. M., Flowers, D. L., Napoliello, E. M., & Eden, G. F.

Related Work: Evans et al.'s study, "Sex Differences in White Matter Development: A Longitudinal Diffusion Tensor Imaging Study," examined the relationship between stress and brain development in children with dyslexia. Their research highlighted the potential long-term consequences of stress on cognitive control-related neural pathways, suggesting that chronic stress may impede the development of essential cognitive control structures.

Year: 2017

Author: McLaughlin, K. A., Weissman, D., & Bitran, D.

Related Work: McLaughlin, Weissman, and Bitran's research, as presented in "Childhood Adversity and Neural Development: Deprivation and Threat as Distinct Dimensions of Early Experience," explored the effects of early-life stress on neural development. While not specific to students with learning challenges, this work highlights the potential long-term consequences of stress on brain structures implicated in cognitive control, which could be particularly relevant for this population.

Year: 2019

Author: Cassady, J. C., & Johnson, R. E.

Related Work: Cassady and Johnson's research, "Cognitive Test Anxiety and Academic Performance," explored the specific effects of cognitive test anxiety on students with learning challenges. Their findings indicated that heightened anxiety during assessments can significantly impair cognitive control functions, leading to decreased academic performance in this population.

Year: 2020

Author: Karalunas, S. L., & Fair, D. A.

Related Work: Karalunas and Fair's study, "Threat-Related Attention Bias in Childhood Predicts the Emergence of Attention Problems and Anxiety Symptoms by Adolescence," investigated the relationship between threat-related attention bias, anxiety, and attention problems in children. Understanding how anxiety and attentional processes are linked is essential for comprehending the cognitive control challenges faced by students with learning difficulties, as these issues often co-occur.

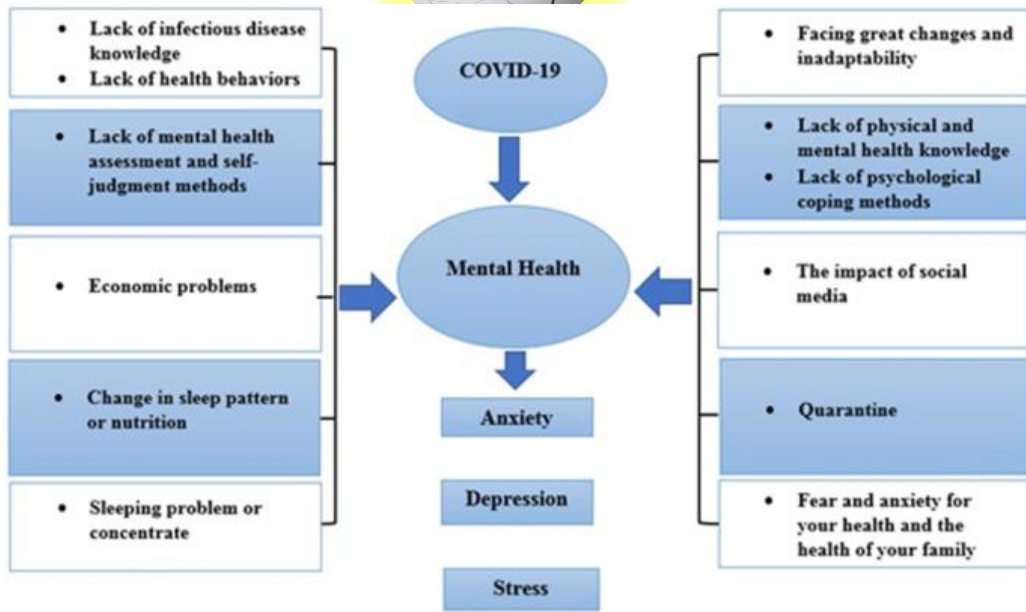
Year: 2021

Author: Paus, T.

Related Work: In "Stress and the Developing Brain," Paus explored the effects of stress on brain development during adolescence. Although not specific to students with learning challenges, this work contributes to the broader understanding of how stress can impact cognitive control as the brain continues to develop, potentially providing insights into the challenges faced by young learners with learning difficulties.

**ANXIETY AND STRESS IN STUDENTS**

Increased stress is one of the many hallmarks of the developmental stages of late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Hogan and Astone, 1986; Arnett, 2000; Shanahan, 2000; Spear, 2000; Scales et al., 2015; Romeo et al., 2016; Barbayannis et al., 2017; Chiang et al., 2019; Lally and Valentine-French, 2019; Matud et al. College students, in particular, follow this tendency. One-fifth of college students have suicidal thoughts as a result of stress, and three-quarters of students report feeling stressed, according to a survey conducted in 2015 by the American College Health Association and the National College Health Assessment (Liu, C. H., et al., 2019; American Psychological Association, 2020). Having a mental health diagnosis predicted by a stressor encountered in college has been shown in studies (Pedrelli et al., 2015; Liu, C. H., et al., 2019; Karyotaki et al., 2020).



**Fig. 1 : Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health**

Numerous factors, both internal and external, contribute to the stress that college students feel (Reddy et al., 2018; Karyotaki et al., 2020). Misra and McKean (2000), Dusselier et al. (2005), Elias et al. (2011), Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), Hj Ramli et al. (2018), Reddy et al. (2018), and Pascoe et al. (2020) all point to the importance of academic stress in higher education. In one national study of college students, 87% said that academic pressure was a top source of stress in their lives (American Psychological Association, 2020). Course loads, studying, time management, competition in the classroom, financial worries, family pressures, and cultural adjustment are just some of the new academic stressors that college students face (Misra and Castillo, 2004; Byrd and McKinney, 2012; Ekpenyong et al., 2013; Bedewy and Gabriel, 2015; Ketchen Lipson et al., 2015; Pedrelli et al., 2015; Reddy et al. Stress in the classroom has been linked to decreased motivation, lower academic performance, and higher rates of college attrition (Pascoe et al., 2020).

Li and Lin (2003), Eisenberg et al. (2009), and Green et al. (2020) all found that students' mental health suffered as a result of academic stress. As defined by researchers (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Tennant et al., 2007; Galderisi et al., 2015; Trout and Alsandor, 2020; Defeyer et al., 2021; Green et al., 2022), psychological (or mental) well-being consists of feelings of contentment with one's life and the ability to deal effectively with stressful situations. Tennant et al. (2007) and Margraf et al. (2020) agree that positive mental health is an understudied but crucial area that helps paint a more comprehensive picture of overall mental health. Furthermore, it has been



established that positive mental health predicts both negative and positive mental health indicators over time (Margraf et al., 2020). Tennant et al. (2007), Eisenberg et al. (2009), and Freire et al. (2016) all find that college students with lower levels of psychological health also have lower levels of academic success.

College students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds experience academic pressure in different ways (Lee et al., 2021). Among college students, for instance, women report higher levels of stress than men do (Misra et al., 2000; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2021). There is a gender gap in how male and female pupils react to stress (Misra et al., 2000; Verma et al., 2011). Furthermore, non-binary students report more stressors and mental health difficulties than their cisgender counterparts do (Budge et al., 2020). Misra and McKean (2000), Elias et al. (2011), Wyatt et al. (2017), Liu, C. H., et al. (2019), and Defeyer et al. (2021) all found that college students' academic stress varied with the academic year they were enrolled in. A number of studies have found that students from racial and ethnic minority groups, such as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American students, are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and suicidality than their white peers. However, these studies are limited and often report mixed or inconclusive findings (Lipson et al., 2018; Liu, C. H., et al., 2019; Kodish et al. To fill this knowledge gap and better understand the demographics of academic stress and low well-being, more study is needed. A mental health crisis has emerged in response to the global spread of coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) (American Psychological Association, 2020; Dong and Bouey, 2020). Higher levels of stress, mental and physical health declines, and other negative outcomes have been linked to the COVID-19 pandemic among college students (American Psychological Association, 2020; Husky et al., 2020; Patsali et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020; Clabaugh et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Lopes and Nihei, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). College students from all backgrounds may experience these difficulties, but they may be especially magnified for students from underrepresented groups (Salerno et al., 2020; Clabaugh et al., 2021; McQuaid et al., 2021; Prowse et al., 2021; Kodish et al., 2022). The ability to target specific groups of kids in need of mental health services is made possible by identifying those at highest risk. The purpose of this investigation was to examine the relationship between academic pressure and students' emotional health. Several objectives fell under this broader one. The primary goal of this study was to examine the correlation between college students' reports of mental health and scores on the Perception of Academic Stress Scale (PAS) and the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS). The second goal is to classify students into those more likely to encounter mental health issues and higher levels of academic pressure. Third, we wanted to see how the public's outlook on the current COVID-19 outbreak affected their stress levels. We postulated that adolescents whose lives were more fraught with academic and COVID-19-related stress would report lower levels of psychological well-being.

Cognitive control refers to a set of mental processes that enable individuals to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors effectively. It plays a crucial role in academic success, as it governs functions like attention, working memory, and impulse control.

### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANXIETY, STRESS, AND COGNITIVE CONTROL IN COLLEGE STUDENTS FACING LEARNING CHALLENGE**

The relationship between anxiety, stress, and cognitive control in college students facing learning challenges is complex and multifaceted. Understanding this relationship in depth is crucial because it can significantly impact a student's academic performance, emotional well-being, and overall college experience. Let's delve into the intricate dynamics of this relationship:

#### **Anxiety and Stress in College Students with Learning Challenges:**



**Academic Anxiety:** College students with learning challenges often experience higher levels of academic anxiety. The fear of underperforming or failing due to their challenges can be a significant source of stress.

**Social Anxiety:** Learning challenges may also lead to social anxiety, as students may worry about how their peers perceive them or fear negative judgments.

**Test Anxiety:** The pressure of exams and assignments can trigger test anxiety, which is heightened in students who struggle with learning challenges, as they may worry about their ability to perform well under pressure.

**Chronic Stress:** Managing the demands of college, such as coursework, deadlines, and social interactions, can contribute to chronic stress. This constant stress can exacerbate learning challenges.

### **Cognitive Control in College Students with Learning Challenges:**

**Cognitive Control Definition:** Cognitive control refers to a set of mental processes that allow individuals to focus their attention, inhibit impulsive behavior, plan, and adapt to changing situations. It's essential for academic success, as it helps in tasks like problem-solving, time management, and self-regulation.

**Impact of Learning Challenges:** Learning challenges can affect various cognitive control processes. For example, difficulties with attention and working memory are common in students with ADHD, while students with dyslexia may struggle with reading fluency and decoding.

**Compensatory Strategies:** Many students with learning challenges develop compensatory strategies to enhance cognitive control. These strategies may include using assistive technology, creating structured study routines, and seeking academic accommodations.

### **The Complex Relationship:**

**Bidirectional Influence:** Anxiety and stress can both impair cognitive control and be exacerbated by cognitive control difficulties. For instance, heightened stress can lead to decreased attention and working memory capacity, making it harder for students to manage their academic responsibilities effectively.

**Vicious Cycle:** When students with learning challenges experience anxiety and stress related to their academic performance, it can create a vicious cycle. Their anxiety can impair cognitive control, leading to academic difficulties, which, in turn, can increase stress and anxiety.

**Impact on Decision-Making:** Cognitive control also plays a crucial role in decision-making. Students facing learning challenges may struggle to make informed choices about their academic workload, study strategies, and time management, which can further contribute to stress and anxiety.

### **Interventions and Coping Strategies:**

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** CBT can help college students develop coping strategies to manage anxiety and stress. It focuses on identifying negative thought patterns and replacing them with more adaptive ones.

**Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques:** Practices like mindfulness meditation and deep breathing can reduce anxiety and stress levels, improving cognitive control and overall well-being.

**Academic Support:** Access to academic accommodations, such as extended test-taking time or note-taking assistance, can alleviate some of the cognitive control challenges associated with learning disabilities.

**Time Management and Study Skills Training:** Teaching students effective time management and study skills can enhance cognitive control and reduce stress related to academic demands.



Peer and Social Support: Encouraging students to seek support from peers, support groups, or mental health professionals can provide emotional relief and strategies for managing anxiety and stress.

Some students with learning challenges develop perfectionistic tendencies in an attempt to compensate for their difficulties. They may set unrealistically high standards for themselves, leading to anxiety when they feel they can't meet those standards. Anxiety and stress can lead to difficulties in maintaining attention and concentration. This can be especially problematic for students with learning challenges who rely heavily on sustained attention for tasks like reading or problem-solving. Anxiety and stress can disrupt emotional regulation, which is closely tied to cognitive control. Students may become overwhelmed by negative emotions, making it challenging to focus on academic tasks. Students with learning challenges may develop avoidance behaviors as a way to cope with anxiety and stress. They might avoid certain classes, assignments, or social situations, which can hinder their academic progress and exacerbate their challenges. Anxiety and stress can erode a student's sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities. Low self-esteem can further impact their cognitive control, making it difficult to initiate tasks or persevere through challenges. College students often face time pressure due to deadlines and exam schedules. For those with learning challenges, this pressure can intensify anxiety and make it even harder to maintain cognitive control and efficient study habits. Encourage students to adopt proactive stress management techniques, such as regular exercise, healthy eating, and sufficient sleep. These practices can enhance cognitive control and reduce anxiety. In severe cases where anxiety and stress significantly hinder academic performance, seeking professional help from counselors or psychologists with expertise in both anxiety and learning challenges can be invaluable. Promote a holistic approach to well-being that addresses both the emotional and cognitive aspects of a student's life. This may include combining cognitive-behavioral interventions with academic support. Emphasize the importance of long-term skill development in managing learning challenges, anxiety, and stress. These are skills that can benefit students throughout their academic and professional lives. Encourage students to engage in regular self-assessment to identify triggers of anxiety and stress. Recognizing these triggers early can help students implement coping strategies effectively. Resilience-building activities and mindset can help students bounce back from setbacks caused by anxiety, stress, or academic challenges. Colleges should educate peers and faculty about the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities to create a more understanding and supportive environment.

**THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY AND STRESS ON COGNITIVE CONTROL**

The impact of anxiety and stress on cognitive control is a significant and well-studied area in psychology and neuroscience. Cognitive control refers to a set of mental processes that enable individuals to manage their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions effectively, particularly in situations that demand attention, decision-making, and goal-directed behavior. Anxiety and stress can profoundly affect cognitive control in several ways:

- Anxiety and stress can lead to heightened distractibility, making it challenging to focus on specific tasks or information. This can result in reduced attention and concentration, which are vital components of cognitive control.
- Working memory is the ability to temporarily hold and manipulate information in one's mind. Anxiety and stress can overload working memory with worries and intrusive thoughts, making it difficult to process new information effectively.
- Anxiety and stress can impair one's ability to inhibit impulsive responses. This can lead to hasty decision-making and impulsive behaviors, undermining cognitive control.

- Anxiety often involves rumination and excessive worrying about future events or past mistakes. These negative thought patterns can consume cognitive resources and hinder productive thinking and problem-solving.
- Cognitive control also involves flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances. Stress and anxiety can reduce cognitive flexibility, making it harder to shift attention or change strategies when necessary.
- When individuals are anxious or stressed, they may become preoccupied with the source of their anxiety, diverting cognitive resources away from pursuing their goals or tasks effectively.

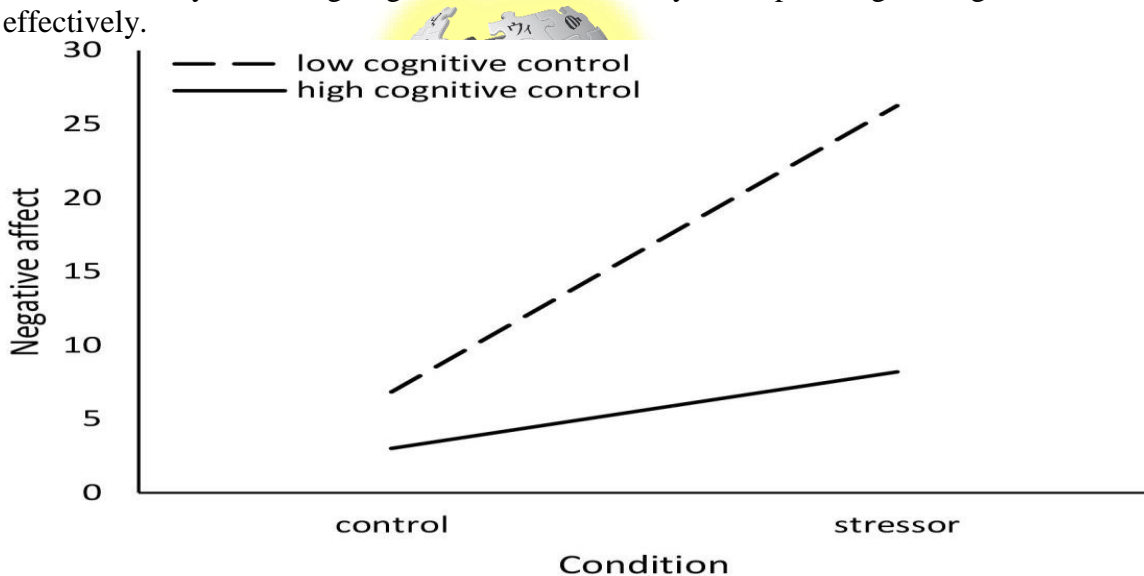


Fig. 2: Cognitive Control and Flexibility in the Context of Stress and Depressive Symptoms

- The physiological symptoms of anxiety, such as increased heart rate, muscle tension, and shallow breathing, can also affect cognitive control by redirecting resources to deal with the body's stress response.
- Stress and anxiety can hinder the retrieval of information from long-term memory, making it difficult for individuals to recall relevant knowledge or past experiences during tasks.
- High levels of anxiety or stress can lead to slower cognitive processing speed, resulting in delayed reactions and decision-making.
- Stress and anxiety can lead to an attentional bias toward negative or threatening stimuli. This can divert cognitive resources away from neutral or positive information, affecting overall cognitive functioning.
- Anxiety and stress can affect social interactions and communication, leading to difficulties in interpreting social cues and maintaining healthy relationships. These challenges can further strain cognitive resources.
- The negative impact of anxiety and stress on cognitive control can create a feedback loop, where cognitive difficulties lead to increased stress and anxiety, further exacerbating cognitive problems.

## COPING MECHANISMS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING CHALLENGES

### Self-Acceptance and Advocacy:

Self-acceptance: The first step is acknowledging one's learning challenge and accepting it as part of who they are. This self-awareness can reduce the emotional toll that learning challenges often bring.



Self-advocacy: Encourage students to communicate with professors, disability services, and peers about their challenges. Colleges often have disability support offices that can provide accommodations such as extended testing time or note-taking assistance.

**Time Management and Organization:**

Planners and calendars: Using digital or physical planners to keep track of assignments, deadlines, and class schedules can help students stay organized.

Task lists: Breaking down assignments into smaller tasks and creating to-do lists can make overwhelming tasks more manageable.

Time-blocking: Allocate specific time blocks for studying, attending classes, and personal activities. This structure can enhance productivity.

**Study Strategies:**

Multisensory learning: Engaging multiple senses in the learning process can be helpful. For example, using colored markers for notes, creating flashcards, or recording lectures for later review.

Study groups: Collaborative learning can be effective. Joining or forming study groups can provide different perspectives and support.

Mind mapping: Visual tools like mind maps and concept maps can help students organize and connect ideas.

**Assistive Technology:**

Text-to-speech and speech-to-text software: These tools can assist with reading and writing tasks.

Note-taking apps: Applications like Evernote or OneNote allow students to organize and access their notes digitally.

Digital audiobooks: For students with reading challenges, audiobooks can be a valuable resource.

**Stress Management and Mental Health:**

Mindfulness and relaxation techniques: Encourage practices like meditation, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation to reduce stress and anxiety.

Counseling services: Many colleges offer counseling services where students can seek emotional support and learn coping strategies.

Time for self-care: Remind students to prioritize self-care activities like exercise, hobbies, and spending time with friends.

**Seeking Academic Support:**

Tutoring: Many colleges offer tutoring services for specific subjects. Seeking help when needed is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Office hours: Encourage students to attend professors' office hours to ask questions and seek clarification on course material.

**Building a Support System:**

Peer support: Encourage students to connect with peers who may have similar challenges. Sharing experiences and strategies can be comforting and valuable.

Family support: Maintain open communication with family members who can provide emotional support and encouragement.

**Routine and Consistency:**

Establishing routines: Consistency in daily routines can help students with learning challenges better manage their time and responsibilities.

Regular sleep schedule: Adequate sleep is crucial for cognitive functioning and managing stress.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**





- Educators and support staff should receive training and information about various learning challenges, including dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and more. This training helps them understand the unique needs and strengths of these students.
- Implement a system for early identification and assessment of students with learning challenges. This allows for timely intervention and the provision of necessary accommodations.
- Collaborate with students, parents, and disability support services to develop and implement individualized plans that outline specific accommodations and support strategies tailored to each student's needs.
- Embrace flexible teaching methods that cater to diverse learning styles. Incorporate a variety of instructional approaches, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic techniques, to accommodate different needs.
- Provide course materials in accessible formats. This may include digital copies, audio versions, or textbooks with large fonts. Ensure online learning platforms are accessible to students with disabilities.



## CONCLUSION

The influence of anxiety and stress on cognitive control in college students with learning challenges is a complex and multifaceted issue. It is crucial for educators, support services, and institutions to recognize and address these challenges. By providing appropriate support, implementing stress-reduction strategies, and fostering a resilient mindset, colleges can create an environment where all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally, regardless of their learning challenges. Ultimately, addressing the intersection of anxiety, stress, and cognitive control can contribute to the success and well-being of college students with learning difficulties.

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