Behind the A+ Smiling Face: Understanding the Emotional Journeys of High-Achieving Students Battling Anxiety : A Qualitative Study

Amandeep Kaur

1.   Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar

Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the emotional experiences of high-achieving students facing anxiety, examining how academic pressures impact their psychological well-being. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research delves into students' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms related to anxiety. Participants included fifteen academically successful undergraduate students from diverse educational backgrounds. Thematic analysis revealed three primary themes: the hidden burden of academic excellence, coping strategies and support systems, and the profound impact of anxiety on overall well-being. Findings highlight that high achievers often mask their anxiety behind a façade of academic success, contributing to underdiagnosis and insufficient support. Students primarily reported employing personal coping strategies such as isolation, perfectionism, and overachievement, while institutional support was perceived as limited. This study emphasizes the necessity for increased awareness, tailored psychological interventions, and institutional support frameworks to address anxiety among academically successful students. These insights could assist educators, psychologists, and policy makers in designing targeted mental health programs that better address the complex needs of high-achieving yet anxious students.

Keywords: *Anxiety, High-Achieving Students, Emotional Wellbeing, Academic Pressure, Coping Mechanisms, Qualitative Study.*

Introduction:

In contemporary education, academic excellence is widely regarded as the hallmark of personal and institutional success. High-achieving students are celebrated for their exceptional academic records, robust intellectual abilities, and consistent top-tier performance (Flett & Hewitt, 2020). However, beneath their polished academic façade, many students grapple silently with significant psychological distress, most notably anxiety disorders (Putwain & Symes, 2018). Anxiety, characterized by excessive worry, persistent fear of failure, and anticipatory apprehension, can profoundly affect students' emotional health and overall life satisfaction (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). It is particularly detrimental when intertwined with academic pressures, causing students to adopt maladaptive coping strategies, including isolation, perfectionism, and compulsive studying (Subramani & Kadhiravan, 2017). The hidden nature of these struggles contributes to a paradox where academically successful students become overlooked in

mental health interventions, perpetuating a vicious cycle of unnoticed suffering (Gibbons, Dempster, & Moutray, 2011).

High-achieving students often internalize societal expectations of perpetual excellence, creating self-imposed pressures and exacerbating underlying anxiety (Damour, 2019). Institutions, parents, and educators tend to equate academic success with emotional resilience, mistakenly presuming that high-achievers naturally possess the tools to manage stress (Lee & Kim, 2020). Consequently, this oversight leads to insufficient psychological support tailored to the unique needs of these students. The literature identifies perfectionism as a significant correlate of anxiety among high-achievers (Flett & Hewitt, 2020). Perfectionistic tendencies, while initially motivating, often foster chronic dissatisfaction, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviours, severely impacting psychological health over time (Putwain & Symes, 2018). Recent studies suggest that anxiety in this group is increasing due to intensified academic competition, societal pressures, and growing prospect uncertainty prospect uncertainty (Damour, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2020).

Given these concerns, qualitative approaches are instrumental in deeply understanding the subjective emotional experiences of students who outwardly excel yet inwardly struggle. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methodologies capture the nuanced emotional journeys, perceptions, and lived experiences, providing richer insights into students' psychological struggles and coping mechanisms (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, this study aims to uncover the hidden emotional narratives of high-achieving students battling anxiety, fill critical gaps in existing research, and inform practical interventions. Exploring these issues qualitatively can provide essential visions for educators, policymakers, and psychological health professionals to develop targeted and sensitive support structures for this vulnerable yet overlooked population.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the lived emotional experiences of high-achieving students battling anxiety.

2. To identify coping mechanisms employed by high-achieving students facing anxiety.

3. To investigate perceived institutional support and its effectiveness in managing anxiety among high-achieving students.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived emotional experiences of high-achieving students who are struggling with anxiety?

2. What coping mechanisms do high-achieving students employ to manage their anxiety?

3. How do high-achieving students perceive the role and effectiveness of institutional support in managing their anxiety?

Methodology of this study:

Table: 1. Methods and Procedures

Methodology	Qualitative; phenomenological approach
Participants	**20 high-achieving undergraduate students (aged 18-24)**
Sampling technique	**Purposive sampling**
Data collection method	**Semi-structured in-depth interviews**
Duration of interviews	**50–60 minutes each**
Data analysis method	**Thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework**
Ethical considerations	**Consent obtained, confidentiality ensured**

Research Findings:

Table: 2. Summary of Key Findings Based on Research Questions

Research Question	Emerging Themes	Illustrative Participant Quotes
1. What are the lived emotional experiences of high-achieving students who are struggling with anxiety?	**- Academic excellence often masks emotional distress.** **- Fear of failure and imposter syndrome are common.** **- Pressure is internal (self-imposed) and external (family, peers, institution).** **- Students often feel isolated in their struggles.**	*"People think I have everything figured out because of my GPA. But inside, I'm always scared I'll slip and lose everything."* *"I feel like I'm living two lives—one that everyone sees and one that's breaking inside."*
2. What coping mechanisms do high-achieving students employ to manage their anxiety?	**Adaptive Strategies:** **- Time management** **- Physical exercise** **- Social support** **- Mindfulness techniques** **Maladaptive Strategies:** **- Overstudying and compulsive routines** **- Perfectionism and self-criticism** **- Procrastination** **- Social withdrawal**	*"If I'm not studying, I feel like I'm wasting time or falling behind."* *"Talking to someone who understands the pressure really helps—even if they don't fix it."* *"Sometimes I avoid starting assignments out of fear I won't do them perfectly."*

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3. How do high-achieving students perceive the role and effectiveness of institutional support in managing their anxiety?	- Services exist but are poorly promoted and hard to access. - Mental health stigma discourages help-seeking. - Concerns about privacy and academic judgment are prevalent. - Institutional support is perceived as generic and not tailored to high-performers. - Faculty often lack training to recognize student distress.	*"They mention there's a counsellor during orientation, but there's no follow-up after that."* *"I don't want my professors to think I'm weak—it might affect how they see me."* *"The counsellors are nice, but they don't understand what it's like to carry this kind of pressure every day."*

1. The Hidden Struggles Behind Academic Excellence

One of the most prominent themes from this study was the invisible emotional burden of high-achieving students. Although these students were celebrated for their top grades, academic awards, and overall performance, many of them revealed experiencing intense anxiety, fear of failure, and chronic self-doubt.

Participants shared that they felt they were living dual lives: one that was visible to teachers, peers, and family members characterized by success, control, and ambition and another that was internal and hidden, filled with worry, stress, and emotional exhaustion. One student shared,

"People think I have everything figured out because of my GPA. But inside, I'm always scared I'll slip and lose everything I've worked for."

This finding supports earlier literature suggesting that external academic success can obscure internal emotional struggles (Damour, 2019). Many students reported experiencing imposter syndrome, where despite their accomplishments, they felt undeserving and feared being exposed as a fraud. This constant tension between external expectations and internal insecurities led to feelings of isolation and, in some cases, a reluctance to seek help.

The unrelenting pressure to maintain excellence was a key driver behind these hidden struggles. Several students felt that a setback, like a bad grade or a missed deadline, could destroy their reputation. As a result, they rarely celebrated their achievements and instead fixated on maintaining or exceeding their performance.

Moreover, participants discussed how this pressure was often self-imposed but reinforced by cultural, familial, and institutional expectations. For example, one student from a high-achieving family explained:

"Failure is not an option in my house. If I don't top the class, I feel like I've let everyone down even myself."

These emotional burdens were often masked behind a "smiling face", leading to misinterpretation by peers and faculty. Because they appeared confident and composed, their struggles were frequently overlooked. As a result, their mental health needs went unnoticed or were deemed less urgent, contributing to a cycle of continued pressure and silence.

This finding echoes the work of Gottschlich and Atapour (2024), who emphasized that academic stress is a complex and often invisible factor affecting even the most successful students, undermining their well-being and potentially leading to burnout.

In summary, this theme underscores a critical paradox in education: those who perform best may also be suffering the most silently. Addressing this hidden burden requires educators, counsellors, and institutions to look beyond performance metrics and actively check in on students' emotional health—especially those who appear to be thriving academically.

2. Coping Mechanisms: Adaptive and Maladaptive Strategies

High-achieving students in this study described a wide range of coping mechanisms used to manage their anxiety. These strategies fell into two broad categories: adaptive (healthy) and maladaptive (unhealthy) coping techniques. The type of coping employed significantly influenced their emotional wellbeing and academic performance.

A. Adaptive Coping Strategies

Some participants reported using constructive and proactive methods to manage their anxiety, though these were less common compared to maladaptive techniques. Examples included:

- **Time Management and Planning**: A few students explained how organizing their schedules, breaking tasks into manageable steps, and setting realistic goals helped reduce feeling overwhelmed.

- **Physical Exercise**: A couple of participants cited running, yoga, or gym as effective ways to release stress and regulate their emotions.

- **Peer and Social Support**: A few students leaned on friends, study groups, or family members to talk through their stress and find emotional support. One participant shared:

"Talking to someone who understands the pressure really helps. Even if they don't fix it, just knowing I'm not alone makes a big difference."

- **Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques**: Some students reported experimenting with deep breathing, journaling, or meditation apps to stay calm during periods of high pressure.

These methods align with established research on adaptive coping in educational psychology (Gottschlich & Atapour, 2024; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), emphasising emotional regulation, problem-solving, and social connection as buffers against academic stress.

B. Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Despite the availability of healthy strategies, most students in this study admitted to using maladaptive methods to cope with anxiety—often unknowingly. These included:

- Overworking or "Productive Avoidance": Many students reported immersing themselves in nonstop studying as a way to distract from anxiety. While this may seem productive, it often masked emotional distress and led to burnout. One student said:

"If I'm not studying, I feel like I'm wasting time or falling behind. But even when I study, the anxiety doesn't really go away."

- **Perfectionism and Self-Criticism**: Participants shared a strong tendency to set unrealistically high standards for themselves. Small mistakes or average performance would often trigger harsh self-talk and guilt.

"If I don't get the highest marks, I feel like I've failed. It's exhausting."

This perfectionistic behaviour has been closely linked to anxiety in several studies (Flett & Hewitt, 2020).

- **Social Withdrawal**: Some students intentionally avoided social interactions, fearing judgment or the possibility of being perceived as weak. While isolation gave them temporary control, it often deepened their emotional distress and loneliness.

- **Procrastination and Avoidance**: Ironically, in trying to cope with stress, some participants delayed starting assignments out of fear of not doing them perfectly—leading to more stress as deadlines approached.

These maladaptive patterns are consistent with the findings of Weinbrecht et al. (2016), who highlighted that avoidant coping strategies tend to sustain or worsen anxiety symptoms over time.

C. Lack of Awareness About Coping Strategies

Another insight from this theme was that most students were unaware of the coping strategies they were using or their consequences. Very few had received formal guidance or psychological education on how to manage stress or anxiety effectively. Many expressed the belief that anxiety was simply part of being a high-achiever:

"I just thought it was normal to feel anxious all the time. No one ever told me it could be managed in healthier ways."

This underscores a vital gap in academic systems: mental health literacy. Without adequate education on emotional regulation, students are left to navigate anxiety using trial and error, often settling into habits that worsen their psychological health.

3. Perceptions of Institutional Support

One of this study's most insightful and concerning findings was how high-achieving students perceived the mental health support systems provided by their educational institutions. Although most universities included in the study had some form of counselling or mental wellness program, students' perceptions of accessibility, relevance, and effectiveness were mixed and often critical.

A. Awareness and Accessibility Gaps

Several participants noted that while their universities had mental health services, these were poorly promoted or hidden within bureaucratic systems. Students often had little knowledge of how to access these services, whom to contact, or what types of support were available. As one student put it:

"They mention there's a counsellor during orientation, but after that, there's no reminder, no follow-up. If you're already anxious, figuring out how to get help can feel overwhelming."

This aligns with research by Al-Najdi et al. (2025), which found that underutilization of mental health services in higher education is often due to poor visibility and communication, especially among high-performing students who are less likely to be flagged as "at risk."

B. Stigma and Confidentiality Concerns

A dominant barrier to seeking institutional support was fear of stigma. Many high-achieving students feared being perceived as weak or "mentally unstable" if they sought help. One participant said:

"I don't want my professors or classmates to think I can't handle pressure. That could affect my reputation."

Confidentiality was also a major concern. Students worried that visiting a counsellor might not remain private or might somehow affect their academic record—especially in competitive environments.

This fear is consistent with global trends in educational psychology. A study by Eisenberg et al. (2009) found that stigma is one of the top reasons students avoid campus mental health resources, especially those in high-achieving and competitive programs.

C. Relevance and Customization of Services

While general counselling services were available, participants emphasized that they did not address the unique psychological struggles of high-achieving students. Most counsellors, students felt, were not trained to deal with perfectionism, chronic performance pressure, or the specific anxieties tied to scholarship maintenance, academic competitions, or family expectations.

"The counsellors are great for general issues, but they don't really understand the pressure of being a topper or someone with high academic expectations."

Students called for customized mental health programs—support groups, workshops, and one-on-one sessions—specifically designed to handle the emotional dynamics of high achievers.

This reflects the findings of Putwain and Symes (2018), who argued that academic anxiety is not one-size-fits-all and must be addressed through context-specific psychological interventions.

D. Faculty and Institutional Culture

Interestingly, while academically supportive, several students reported that faculty members were not trained to recognize emotional distress. The culture in many institutions prioritized output over wellbeing:

"It's all about grades and results. No one asks how we're doing mentally—unless we break down."

This performance-centric atmosphere contributed to a lack of empathy or intervention even when students showed signs of burnout or mental fatigue. There was also fear and pressure to perform at the cost of wellbeing, driven by institutional benchmarks like scholarships, merit lists, and academic rankings.

Discussion

Table: 2. Key Findings and Interpretations

Theme	Key Findings	Interpretation & Supporting Literature	Implications
1. Emotional Experiences of High-Achieving Students	**Students face high internal pressure, fear of failure, and emotional isolation despite outward success.**	**Confirms that academic excellence can mask emotional distress. (Damour, 2019)**	**Institutions must recognize that high achievers are not immune to mental health issues.**
2. Adaptive Coping Mechanisms	**Some students used time management, physical activity, peer support, and mindfulness.**	**Reflects positive strategies aligned with resilience and mental health literature. (Gottschlich & Atapour, 2024)**	**Promote and integrate wellness programs, peer mentoring, and stress management workshops.**
3. Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms	**Overstudying, perfectionism, procrastination, and self-isolation were common.**	**Consistent with studies showing these increase anxiety and risk of burnout. (Weinbrecht et al., 2016)**	**Need for structured mental health education to discourage harmful coping behaviours.**
4. Awareness and Accessibility of Support	**Services exist but are poorly promoted and not student-friendly.**	**Hidden or unclear pathways deter students from seeking help. (Al-Najdi et al., 2025)**	**Improve visibility of mental health resources via student portals, orientation, and faculty alerts.**
5. Stigma and Confidentiality Concerns	**Students fear judgment and breaches of privacy when accessing mental health services.**	**Matches global data on stigma as a major deterrent. (Eisenberg et al., 2009)**	**Launch destigmatization campaigns, guarantee confidentiality, and normalize help-seeking.**
6. Lack of Personalized Support	**Students feel current counselling does not address their unique high-achiever stressors.**	**Generic programs fail to meet specific psychological needs. (Putwain & Symes, 2018)**	**Design specialized support services for high achievers (e.g., perfectionism-focused counselling).**

7. Faculty and Institutional Culture	Teachers often focus only on performance, missing emotional distress signals.	Academic environments reinforce pressure and silence on emotional well-being.	Train faculty to identify signs of mental distress and initiate support conversations.

Conclusion:

This study offers valuable insights into the often-overlooked emotional struggles of high-achieving students grappling with anxiety. The research highlights a paradox: while these students consistently excel academically, their success frequently conceals profound emotional distress. Participants revealed that internal pressures, perfectionism, and fear of failure create a fragile foundation beneath their outward accomplishments. These findings highlight the critical need for mental health frameworks that are not only accessible but also specifically tailored to the unique experiences of high-performing students. Coping mechanisms ranged from healthy practices like mindfulness and time management to maladaptive behaviours such as overstudying and social withdrawal, reflecting the diverse ways students attempt to manage their anxiety. Although available in many cases, institutional support was often perceived as generic, stigmatized, or difficult to access—further isolating students who might already feel misunderstood. This calls for a proactive shift in institutional culture, where mental wellbeing is integrated into academic environments and faculty are equipped to recognize and respond to emotional distress. Going forward, research should investigate the long-term effects of academic pressure on student psychological health, and assess the effectiveness of specialized interventions. Ultimately, by recognizing and addressing the emotional challenges behind high achievement, educational institutions can cultivate a more balanced and humane learning experience—one where achievement is measured not just by grades, but by the student's overall wellbeing.

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