

OPINION

We need to help students learn how to overcome their anxiety

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Alexandra Shimo is a creativity coach, professor and author.

I knew that something was different this year when it came time to grade my students' work.

In my nine years of teaching and lecturing at various universities and colleges in Ontario, I have found that some anxiety around the end of the school year is to be expected. But this year, rationality had gone the way of the woolly mammoth, and the frenzied thinking that sometimes happens when you combine Gen Z with old-fashioned concepts such as deadlines convinced them of strange things: All grades were in jeopardy from sabotage, or work that I hadn't gotten around to grading might suddenly disappear, like a rabbit in a top hat, and be given an automatic zero. I received these worries as e-mails at all times of the day and night – or, worse, as e-mails from my boss saying a student had contacted her.

Anxiety has started to seep into every aspect of the teaching profession. As university professors, it affects how we teach. When I started teaching at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies in 2015, we were advised to lecture for 30 minutes, then use an exercise to consolidate the new material. Today, we lecture for 15 minutes before we start to fear that students might have fallen asleep or tuned out. We are told to expect that some students will still feel overwhelmed by these microlessons, and we should not expect their presence: They might play hooky, get bored or wander off, which inevitably they did. We are told not to expect them to write grammatically, presumably as the sustained concentration required to self-correct is more than their nervously brains can handle.

As an author who has suffered debilitating anxiety in the past, I recognize that many behaviours that look like apathy, rudeness or laziness are conditioned by the anxiety of self-doubt. Worrying affects the brain's amygdala, a peanut-sized group of neurons at the base of the brain stem, a tiny structure with outsized ambitions, affecting productivity, sleep, learning, concentration, the ability to sit still, time management, memory and decision-making, i.e. pretty much any activity that is needed to complete university (and also posteducation employment).

We need these students to learn how to overcome these difficulties. We need them to be good at decision-making. We will need them to be able to stay calm and collected, to be able to negotiate all the changes that are predicted for the next 20 years, including more pandemics, more wildfires, more extreme heat alerts, more droughts, more flooding, more climate refugees, more food scarcity, more income inequality. We need them to figure out how to navigate all of this, and then find hope.

To be sure, the provincial governments have started to recognize the issue, if not its size and complexity, and have started implementing mental-health education. Ontario introduced \$114-million for [mental-health funding](#) in schools for the 2023-24 school year, which it says is a 555-per-cent increase since 2018. British Columbia has introduced the [Mental Health in Schools Strategy](#), which is focused on prevention, wellness promotion and early intervention, and includes anxiety workshops in schools. Alberta recently [announced](#) \$148-million for mental-health support in schools. The federal government has taken notice, too: In April, the Liberals [unveiled](#) a new \$500-million Youth Mental Health Fund.

To prepare our kids, the Toronto Youth Cabinet is calling for a list of necessary changes to schools, including mandatory mental-health literacy in the Ontario curriculum; mental-health days for students; data collection of school services; and additional mental-health staff, such as psychologists, social workers, guidance counsellors and crisis-intervention workers.

And today's youth suggest these changes are desperately needed: 79 per cent of Ontario students said they struggled to access mental-health support in schools, according to a 2023 survey published by the Toronto Youth Cabinet.

It took me more than two decades – of therapy, exercise and studying meditation – to go from being a nervous teenager with an anxiety disorder to a

grown adult who was able to hold down a job, teach and write. As someone who grew up in the 1980s, a time of relative social stability where social, economic and health progress was taken as a given, that healing journey was comparatively leisurely: I had the luxury of time to heal and grow. As our modern list of social ills grows longer, however, today's students do not.

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-we-need-to-help-students-learn-how-to-overcome-their-anxiety/?intcmp=gift_subscribed

<https://www.alexandrashimo.com>

About me



Hello there. Welcome. I am an author, journalist, and educator. Raised on both sides of the Atlantic, in England, the United States and Canada, I came home to my birth town of Toronto after receiving my BA at Oxford in politics, philosophy and economics, and an MA from Columbia University in journalism. A former producer for CBC radio and editor at Maclean's, Canada's largest current affairs magazine, I am passionate about journalism and social justice, and pursue these interests through my volunteer work, journalism, teaching, and books.

I am the co-author of the bestselling memoir *Up Ghost River: A Chief's Journey Through the Turbulent Waters of Native History*, and author of the memoir *Invisible North: The Search for Answers on A Troubled Reserve*. I have been a finalist for the Governor General's award, the Trillium Book award, the B.C. Non-Fiction award, and winner of the CBC Bookie Award, the Speaker's Book Award, Donald Grant Creighton Award. My essays, stories, and criticism have appeared in The Guardian, The Independent, The Walrus, The Globe and Mail, Maclean's, Toronto Life, and many other publications.

I teach creative non-fiction and memoir at the [University of Toronto](#). In my spare time, I also teach [meditation](#) at the [Consciousness Explorer's Club](#) and sit on the advisory board for [Up With Women](#) which helps formerly homeless women and gender diverse individuals escape poverty. I identify as BIPOC (Asian) and LGBTQIA+. Oh, and I'd be lost without my wife, [Lia Grimanis](#), my partner in crime, questionable fashion, and parenting.

Alexandra can write, so I'm sure she knows what she is talking about. She could be a defender of the current "light brigade" of academic youth, but rather laments them too. She puts it down to "anxiety" and associated defenses. But maybe, if you have never actually applied yourself to anything truly difficult and challenging, and have fobbed your way through school, never achieving much of real substance and merit, you will experience "anxiety" when finally required to do so simply because you have never developed the basic skills and qualities needed to be competent. Yet they think they can still fake their way through: it is all they know how to do. But as someone here said to me "These people are going to medical school and will operate on me?" Those students who genuinely work and learn need to have faith that they will finally get their reward and true recognition when the fakers face demands they cannot meet.

In my last regular teaching assignment, shifting from Grade 10's dismayed by regular schooling after the pandemic and online learning, to senior electives with complacent students some of whom assumed they were on-track for McGill, I finished the year feeling I had never given out an honest mark all year.

Critical and cranky as this may sound, I have profound sympathies for children and youth given this world to make their way in, to trust has a place for them.

I have the feeling that Alexandra has earned her place in the world more than most people. The courage and perseverance she demonstrated overcoming so much gives her the strength and competency to do what she does so well. TJB