Anxiety-Filled Reflections from a Professor on the Emotional Spectrum

Kristina Scott, Ed.D.,
Salem State University

Author's Contact Information

Kristina Scott, Ed.D., Assistant Professor of Special Education,
Salem State University
300 Lafayette Street
Salem, Massachusetts, 01970
Phone: 774.633.7720
email: kscott@salemstate.edu

Abstract:

I started school as selectively mute and in later years was diagnosed with a social anxiety disorder. Not many individuals with a social phobia choose careers that require interpersonal communication; I did. I chose to be a university professor. I did so in a time when emotional disabilities in university students are on the rise and often times disability labels are coupled with a culture of shame, hiding, and feeling less than. I speak openly about my disability and with my students so that others can relate or can at least bring this vulnerable experience into their future profession as teachers.

Key Words:

social anxiety, anxiety disorder, emotional disability, mental health, university, teaching.

Introduction

I started school as selectively mute; I spoke at home but did not communicate in any other environment. Selective mutism is clinically diagnosed when a child fails to speak in a particular setting/situation for at least one month, and this lack of communication is not better accounted for by a communication disorder, autism, or a psychotic disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). I spent my first three years in school without a sound. My selective mutism diagnosis, as I grew older, was later classified as social anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are the most commonly diagnosed mental disorder, with 30% of adults affected at some point in their lives (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). I, however, was diagnosed as a child, and despite cognitive behavioral therapy work and support groups this diagnosis still has huge implications in how I think, in my profession (as a university special education professor) and in my life today.

I have extreme discomfort in any new social situation and this discomfort triggers a negative cycle of thoughts where I am so hyper-focused on underperforming I have to rely on many strategies to prevent myself from completely shutting down or freezing in the moment. Many individuals with social anxiety and discomfort in social situations choose careers in jobs that do not require interpersonal communication (Bruch, Fallon, & Heimberg, 2003). This may be why it was really hard for teachers to relate to my social struggles and educate my peers so they would not throw comments, such as, "Great, I'm next to the girl who doesn't talk", about my disability around as insults. In fact, Korem (2016) found that teachers indicated they could not understand the internal experiences of students who did not speak.

I chose to be a teacher, and then later through learning more strategies and continuing my schooling, I chose to enter higher education as a professor responsible for training the next generation of teachers. Emotional disabilities are on the rise (National Center on Learning Disabilities, 2017). The mental health of university students is a global concern (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2001). More and more students in university settings are diagnosed with anxiety disorders. Bella and Omigbodun (2009) found 19.8% of their university student population identified as having extreme debilitating anxiety. Other studies have found similar numbers (Baptista et al., 2012; Tillfors & Furmark, 2007). I stand among these students, as an instructor, with the same struggles.

The job of a university professor often asks one to promote themselves and broadcast their own accomplishments. This is asking me to do the task I have struggled with my entire life. The truth is attention (positive or negative) in any environment makes me feel really uncomfortable. So in a profession that calls for self-promotion in a public forum, I fail. I do not let anyone know when I have been acknowledged for committee work, published an article, or received outstanding teacher evaluations. In my professional life, this is the largest strife I have, and it sometimes leaves me questioning if academia is really for me. Even with this discord, I know I perform well in all the aforementioned areas, and again it is a negative internal thought cycle I am contending with.

At the beginning of every new semester I am extremely stressed; my social anxiety is heightened as I walk into a room of students I automatically think are judging me. I know nothing about most of the students on the first day of class, and until I get to know them, my negative cycle of thinking and the stress associated with it is exacerbated. The way I successfully decrease this is through making goals to get to know my students, focusing my attention outward towards them instead of in an inward thought spiral. After the first class I want to know one fact about each student. By the third class of the semester I want to know and use each student's name. I then spend some time associating the shared fact (written down in the first class of the semester) with the physical presence of the student. My next goal is to have an active conversation with this student about their shared fact; this needs to be done by the sixth class of the semester. Essentially what I am doing is breaking down social tasks into what I, myself, find to be manageable. This active (in-my head structured) conversation is not something many professors spend time thinking about or their class time doing, but it is something that is necessary for me to do in order to perform my job. In fact, it may be necessary for all professors to do as research on university teacher-student relationship are noted to be successful when the professor is approachable, available, encouraging, open, supportive, respectful, trustworthy, honest, fair, and make efforts to develop a connection or closeness with students (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

Once I get to know each student and have had a one-on-one conversation with each of them, I have started a relationship with them. It is, usually, at this point I feel comfortable to open up to the class, as a whole, about my anxiety and the social struggles I have had in the past and those I am still working on today. I out myself. I stand in front of my students exposing what my grade school peers consistently picked on as my greatest flaw. I discuss my triggers with my students and the strategies I have to calm myself and the environmental strategies I use. I acknowledge my triggers are broadly unplanned situations, and newness. I speak specifically about these triggers in relation to university teaching and how it may be seen in having to scrap the entirety of a planned lesson and navigate un-planned territory or adding any new individual into my classroom (because this puts me back to where I am on day one of the semester, nervous and with a negative cycle of thinking about this new added dynamic). I also let my students know what some outward signs are that I am having difficulty; these signs include: increased pacing of the room, cracking my knuckles, sweat starting to form, shaking of my hand as I write on the board, blanking on a thought or a student's name in high-pressure moments, and/or fidgeting with a pen as I walk the room checking in with students. There are my internalizing signs my students cannot see. My increased heart palpitations, my thought patterns, or the dizziness and out-of-body experiences I can also have in these moments. I share this all to clue them into signs of internalizing behaviors they may see out in their school-based field placements and/or in future students they may have in their classroom that struggle with anxiety. I used to worry about outing myself and cluing them in to all outward signs of my inner turmoil, but that worry has dissipated as my students each semester, upon learning this information, have been both respectful and responsive. Their responsiveness to my outward signs have included: jumping in to lead more of the discussion for me, drawing me in to small group conversations, and even simply saying, "I know you know my name, but think you are blanking now. My name is...". My students' abilities to assist me in these occasions

gives me a glimpse into their ability to respond to future students they may have in their own classrooms. After their responsive attempts I also have the responsibility to positively praise how they have helped me so that it reinforces this skill, and it can serve as an explicit example for others in the class to know how to respond in the future.

The exposure of my disability in this very vulnerable way is all done, coincidentally before observations and evaluations of my teaching performance take place. Observations will always be nerve-wracking because the very job of the individual sent in to my class is to judge and evaluate me, which is essentially the root of all anxiety. It does help if I know the people who will be doing the observation; this could be done through having a relationship with the person or it could be done by me getting to read about the individual who will be observing me. It also helps to know (and this is why I try and figure out the background of the person because this I believe shapes) what they will be looking for. Before going into an observation I have already constructed how I will be evaluated through black-and-white terms on paper, and how the different avenues of the observer's background could shape and color their evaluation lens. Due to this excessive thinking, before the observation takes place, I have pre-planned every possible 'choose-your-own-adventure' scenario that could go down, based on my students' personalities, the observer, and my own anxious-self. I know in the end I will only think that my observation went 'alright' at best because I will only perform one of my made-up scenarios. In the end, I also know that nobody will be a harsher critic than I am myself.

Despite or maybe because of my struggles, I also know that I belong in the classroom. With 41.6% of university students identifying anxiety as a major obstacle they have, I know that I am a professor my students can relate to (American Psychological Association, 2013). I live it, and because I have had social struggles for my entire schooling career I have a tool-kit full of strategies that I can and do share. I am a voice, a model, and an example of perseverance and overcoming limiting factors. I once thought outing myself would stigmatize me; it would cause students to think I did not belong in the university setting and I had nothing valuable to share. Sharing my struggles, however, has done the exact opposite. It has caused student to view me as relatable, to open up about their own experiences, and even disclose their own disability labels, struggles, and strategies in front of a class of their peers.

I know that I never had the chance to meet someone who was so open about their own disability and their past and current struggles. I never had a face and a voice in education that I could relate to. So even though academia has presented me with many adversities, I am at least one voice and one educator that future teachers (my students) will encounter, relate to, and hopefully be encouraged by as they think about educating diverse individuals with special needs of their own.

References

American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5ᵗʰ ed).* Arlington, VA: Author.

American Psychiatric Association (2013). College students' mental health is a growing concern. *Monitor on Psychology, 44 (6)*, 13-16.

Baptista, C. A., Loureiro, S. R., Osorio, F. L., Zuardi, A. W., Magalhaes, P. V., Kapczinski, F., Filho, A. S., Freitas-Ferrari, M. C., & Crippa, J. A. S. (2012). Social phobia in Brazilian university students: Prevalence, under-recognition and academic impairment in women. *Journal of Affective Disorders. 136 (3),* 857-861

Bella, T. T., & Omigbodun, O. O. (2009). Social phobia in Nigerian university students: prevalence, correlates and comorbidity. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 44,* 458-463.

Bruch, M.A., Fallon, M., & Heimberg. R. G. (2003). Social phobia and difficulties in occupational adjustment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 50(1),* 109-117.

Hagenauer, G., & Volet, S. E. (2014). "I don't think I could, you know, just teach without any emotion": Exploring the nature and origin of university teachers' emotions. *Research Papers in Education, 29*, 240-262.

Korem, A. (2016). Teachers' outlook and assistance strategies with regards to "shy" pupils. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 59,* 137-145.

National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2017). *The state of learning disabilities (4ᵗʰ ed.)* New York: Author.

Stanley N. & Manthorpe, J. (2001) Responding to students' mental health needs: impermeable systems and diverse users. *Journal of Mental Health, 10(1),* 41–52.

Tillfors, M., & Furmark, T. (2007). Social phobia in Swedish university students: prevalence, subgroups and avoidant behavior. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 42 (1),* 79-86.