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Britney Saguache

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Graduation Anxiety

Britney Saguache

A Capstone project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

Many graduating college students do not know how to manage their graduating anxiety and it can become a challenge to face. Anxiety during this time can cause students to feel worried leading up to graduation and have an impact on sleeping patterns, concentration in doing coursework and changes in relationships. When symptoms of anxiety are deeply interfering with college students' lives, it's important to learn ways to manage anxiety. When college students learn to manage graduation anxiety, it can help to overcome the unexpected, and bring back some control over the uncertainty graduation brings. To address the lack of anxiety management skills, I created a one-day workshop about anxiety management for graduating students at California State University, Monterey Bay.

Needs Statement

Graduating from college can bring anxiety and make one feel anxious, worried, and lonely when it comes to thinking about the future and can affect sleeping patterns, finishing coursework and relationships (“Post- Graduation Stress”, 2021). Graduating brings a whole new perspective on life and it's a huge accomplishment, as individuals go from college student to college graduate. Graduation can also bring a scary unknown and trigger anxiety through this transition. Students in this phase can be fearful about the future or even sad that college life is ending (Tanya, 2023). These internal struggles can have impacts on one's sleep, and physical effects on the body. This anxiety can also have a consequence on learning and focusing especially when graduation is around the corner as well as cause some changes within relationships.

Sleeping can already be a problem for college students, but, when dealing with graduation, the anxiety can worsen sleep patterns. Previous research has shown that poor

sleeping patterns can increase mental health issues (Milojevich & Lukowski, 2016). Poor sleep quality results in more anxiety and feeling restless and resulting in poor academic performance making it a never ending cycle of poor habits. “Sleeping patterns tend to worsen over time in undergraduates students,” which is concerning if mental health like anxiety from graduation is also associated with this. (Milojevich & Lukowski, 2016) With the pressures of finals and beginning to transition out of college, college seniors may feel greater anxiety like there is not enough time to finish or attend to all obligations (Tanya, 2023). As college students become seniors, they may struggle with trying to balance college assignments and figure out what comes after. Students who have test and homework anxiety have more of a higher chance of other health behaviors which includes sleep (Hamilton et al., 2021). This study shows that students who have homework anxiety have an impact on sleep quality. To conclude, poor sleep quality results in having anxiety, trouble concentrating and feeling restless.

Graduation anxiety can give college students a hard time to work and focus on assignments. Goselin and Rickert (2022) explained that one of the major reasons college students experience anxiety and other mental illnesses is due to transitioning from college student to college graduate. A quarter of students, according to Patterson et al. (2021), agreed that anxiety affects their school work. With an increase of anxiety and increase in academic workload, college students may fall into academic failure (Goselin & Rickert, 2022). Having an overload of coursework to finish, and thinking about the future and although it can be exciting it can also be overshadowed by uncertainty. (Tanya, 2023) Graduating college students that are struggling with the worry of transitioning out of college may be ultimately at higher risk of performing poorly in their academics.

Changes in relationships can also add another stressor to transitioning out of college and adding to graduation anxiety. Depending if one is moving back home, or staying put, or moving for work, changes in relationships will occur and it requires flexibility and preparedness for the people in one's circle. (Tanya, 2023) For college students, friendships and people who have supported one's college journey, these relationships can go one of two ways, staying connected or losing touch. Losing touch during this huge transition can make one feel very isolated, and feeling isolated can make the world feel dark therefore feeling isolated and lonely. (“Intimacy vs. Isolation”, 2023) In another study, it mentions that during transition from campus life to a social life, anxiety can be attributed to retreat, and indifference among college students. (He, 2022) Having anxiety in general may cause turbulence within friendships and other relationships and that can cause graduation anxiety and affect making relationships once graduated too.

Anxiety, when coming towards the end of the college journey, can affect students and their mental health about their next steps in their new future. Anxiety in the senior year can cause some troubles finishing assignments, as well as disrupting sleep and changes in relationships. In order to increase their awareness of graduation anxiety and help give small steps in order to approach this type of anxiety, I created a one-day workshop for Human Development graduating students at California State University, Monterey Bay.

Theory

This journey in development involves stage six of the eight stages of Erik Erickson's psychosocial development theory, intimacy vs. isolation. This stage covers emerging adulthood into adulthood, as college students are wondering about what their future lies ahead after college.

(“Intimacy vs. Isolation”, 2023) We are saying goodbye to our college experience and may be saying goodbye to our college friends and other people that supported us throughout this journey. This transition can feel very lonely saying goodbye to part of one's inner friend circle but once transitioned out, people in this stage look for deeper relationships where closeness is developed. This can be relationships, or just friendships, even people to connect in our career or deepen one's spiritual path. (“Intimacy vs. Isolation”, 2023) Being able to connect and build relationships in this path can be very beneficial for mental and physical wellbeing. (Cherry, 2023) Stage five in Erikson's theory, identity vs role confusion may linger which may look like reidentifying ourselves to fit in or to please others in this new sense of adulthood. (“Intimacy vs. Isolation”, 2023) This can be a confusing time as relationships are changing, trying to fit into this new sense of adulthood and trying to find ones selves in society can be difficult if not managed well.

When losing relationships, like throughout the transition out of college, this can result in either intimacy or isolation. If one is able to successfully develop relationships during this stage then one moves onto the next Erikson stage. But if one doesn't successfully build relationships then it results in isolation. (“Intimacy vs. Isolation”, 2023) Struggling with building closeness can result in few friends, weak social support and no intimacy. After graduation, this can be very detrimental for freshly graduated students dealing with moving away and saying bye to the college experience, this can probably feel very isolating. Not meeting social needs can lead one into a dark head space and eventually push people away. (Cherry, 2023) Being able to make friends in this new transition can help college graduates feel a sense of belonging.

Consideration of Diversity

My project will be conducted at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB) for students who are graduating in Human Development and Family Science major (HDFS). According to the California State University Monterey Bay website, the breakdown of graduating students from fall 2022 is about over 2,640 students with a total of 7,504 enrollments in total. 63% of the total student population at CSUMB is women and the remaining 37% are men. The majority of CSUMB students' ages of the total population fall under at 2,199 at ages 18-20 and 3,084 at ages 21-24 (Fast Facts, 2022). According to CSUMB Institutional Assessment and Research, Human Development and Family Science has a total of 184 students from fall 2022 (ERSS, 2022). I would not expect these participants to be a reflection of all of CSUMB, as the majority of HDFS is women (personal communication, Weisskirch, etc.) and only 184 students out of the whole 7,504 students that belong to CSUMB. With my project being about graduation anxiety, and only presenting to students in HDFS major and not the entire CSUMB graduating classes, my project will only be helpful to HDFS students. This will only be geared towards graduating seniors, and graduation anxiety but may be helpful for similar anxieties when mentioning techniques but not other mental illnesses.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the project, participants will be able to

1. Distinguish two potential challenges of the transition period from college student to college graduate.
2. Indicate three forms of social support in the transition away from college.
3. Indicate two strengths and two weaknesses one is bringing into the workforce.

Methods

I created a one day workshop on graduation anxiety for graduating HDFS students on Zoom on April 13, 2023. First, I introduced myself to the participants and thank them for showing up to my Zoom capstone presentation. To loosen up, I shared a little bit about my experience with graduation anxiety and some of the things I've been feeling to set the tone for the participants so that they can share their experiences with anxiety. Firstly in my presentation, I created a two round, short scramble game. For round one, the word that was scrambled was 'unrealistic expectations', I also gave a hint that read, "May be motivation but may bring feelings of shame if not met". The second word that was scrambled was 'social support' and the hint I gave was, "A network of family, friends, and community members, etc that is available in times of need." See Appendix A for both word scrambles. Both scrambled words were easily unscrambled by participants.

After I went on to talk about what graduation anxiety was, I explained that it's a huge transition from dependent living of childhood and adolescence into full independent adulthood. One other major point I explained is that the months of April and May come into full swing with due dates, finals, and celebration plans coming in so fast which can be another factor of graduation anxiety. I then went into a little more detail about different factors that contribute to graduation anxiety which I talked about fear of the future, relationship changes and dealing with expectations. Then, I created a slide asking the participants if they can distinguish potential challenges of the transition period from college student to college graduate. See Table 1 for participants' responses.

Next, I shared a concept called Circle of Friends and shared that the point of this visual is to demonstrate that everyone needs "circles" of friends in every circle. Then, I talked about some

ways to stay connected with friends which I then mentioned to stay connected and ways to deal with anxiety which were, form new connections, forging one's direction and main and identify new interests. Similarly to the challenge slide, I made another slide gathering participants' responses but this one asked, "What are some forms of social support in the transition away from college?" See Table 2 for participants' responses. Lastly I talked about going into the workforce and mentioned that as college students we are use to having a syllabus and seeing our requirements and standards but in the workforce we don't so I talked a bit on how important it is to hone down on our skills and around feedback as well where it wasn't common in college. I also mentioned that it's not too early to start exploring positions that align with our own interest. To summarize, I recapped everything I previously mentioned and ended with some positive notes about taking charge of our wellbeing and graduation will be full of new potential. See Appendix A for full presentation slides.

Results

Learning outcome 1 was for participants to distinguish two potential challenges of the transition period from college student to college graduate. I think this learning outcome was definitely met as I created a slide where I needed participants' responses for. I had three empty text bubbles and out of the five participants I had in total, three participants came up with one either personal or something I had mentioned previously to answer the learning outcome. See Table 1 for what they said.

Learning outcome 2 was to indicate three forms of social support in the transition away from college. Similarly to learning outcome 1, I also had three empty text bubbles on a slide where I had participants either respond with something personal or something I had already

mentioned. Three participants out of five in total responded which means that this learning outcome was met. See Table 2 for responses.

Learning outcome 3 was to indicate two strengths and two weaknesses one is bringing into the workforce. I did not collect any data on this learning outcome. However, based on the last two learning outcomes, if I would have asked a similar question like the first two learning outcomes, I think the participants would have definitely answered it. So to conclude, learning outcome 3 was not met based on no data.

Discussion

I believe this project was generally successful. Two out of three learning outcomes were met successfully. Participants were able to answer and elaborate on their own experiences dealing with graduation anxiety and altogether relate to one another. They were responsive to my questions with no hesitation and even though it was a small group and with it being over Zoom, it's very different trying to put together an online project. It was also difficult to check in how participants responded and take in information through a computer screen. The overall results for this project was everything was conducted smoothly and easy going as anxiety was no foreign concept for the five participants I had and knew personally already. However, I think it could have been more impactful with more participants. In relation to Erick Ericksons stage six, intimacy versus isolation, a big portion of my presentation was about connecting and feeling lonely and or isolated going through this college transition. I provided some tips on how to stay connected with college peers and encouraged to make new friends. I think my results were consistent with my theory but not 100 percent, as I couldn't relate it to my third learning outcome.

When talking about diversity, I could have definitely reached out to more people from different majors but my own anxiety got in the way of doing that. Since my participants were from HDFS, one way I could have included more diversity is reaching out to non HDFS major students. There were multiple ways to reach out like simply emailing my different classes that are not HDFS major related and send an email asking for people to come. Since it was on Zoom, emailing would have been most effective and convenient to get more people with different schedules. I could have also reached out to more HDFS students in my current capstone class to get more participants. For content, I could have made it more interactive, although I did have pretty active people in my session, I could have added a game or two relating to anxiety like Kahoot for example. Even though my project was generally successful, in the future I hope college students are able to identify that they have anxiety and not be scared of it and overcome it with healthy anxiety techniques.

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Table 1

Responses to what participants distinguish as challenges of transitioning

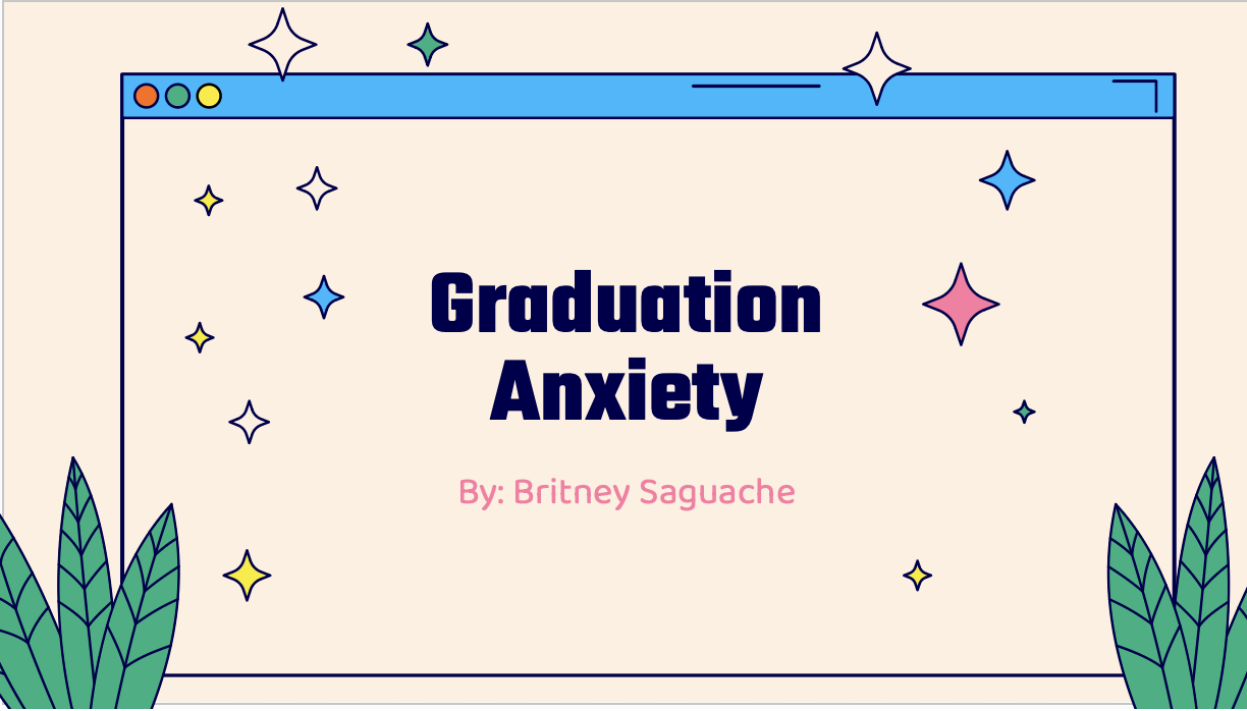
- Being asked the questions like if you have a job lined up or if ones applied yet, questions don't stop
 - Challenge of feeling pressured or lost
 - Lots of pressure of continuing education like grad school, etc
-

Table 2

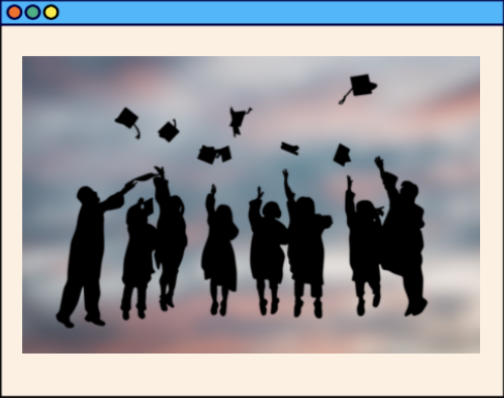
Responses to what are some forms of social support in the transition away from college

- My family have been so supportive all the way through this transition with me.
 - Gathering with those closest to you
 - Guidance from current professors
-

Appendix A

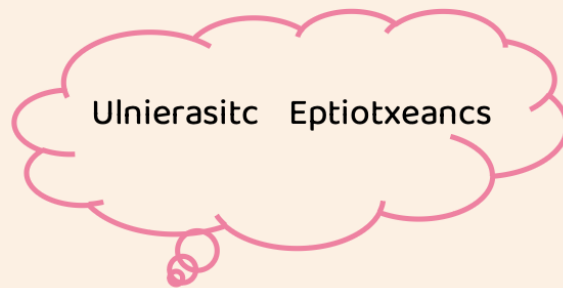
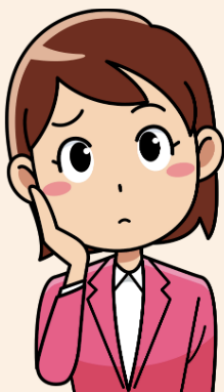


What I Will Be Covering



- What is Graduation Anxiety ?
 - Future
 - Relationships
 - Expectations
- Challenges of transitioning
- Social support
- Strengths/Weaknesses of going into workforce

ROUND 1



Hint* May be motivation but may bring feelings of shame if not met

Answer: Unrealistic Expectations

ROUND 2



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Hint* A network of family and friends, community members, etc that is available in times of need

Answer: Social Support



What is Graduation Anxiety?


- Graduating is exciting and a huge accomplishment but also anxiety provoking
- The college years is a transition
- Life is in the palm of your hands which includes anxiety, stress and even a sense of loneliness
- Graduation rapidly approaches
- Some factors that contribute to anxiety transition to adulthood is uncertainty, loss, unrealistic expectations, and fear

- Important to acknowledge your hard work to get to this place and realize any difficult feelings you're facing are normal.

Can you relate to any of this?

Fear of the future


- This transition is exciting and can be full of positive potential
- It can sometimes feel paralyzing, distress and anxiety of the "Now what?"
- Securing a job in your chosen career field can weigh heavy



The illustration shows a person sitting on a small stool inside a circular, glass-like structure labeled "COMFORT ZONE". The person has their arms crossed and a somewhat neutral or slightly anxious expression. The background is a light blue gradient with some faint white lines suggesting a sky or light rays.

Relationship Changes

- College graduates experience a change in relationships
- It might be hard to secure a position in chosen field and it might take flexibility and willingness to move and scatters people apart
- Professors, adults, advisors may not be available to you in person
- Separation anxiety can happen to people of any age, not just young children
- Mourning your "old life" can make it hard to adjust to your new situation



The illustration shows a person's head in profile, with a thought bubble above it. Inside the thought bubble, a person is depicted floating in water, with their arms raised in a gesture of surprise or distress. The background is a dark blue gradient.

Distinguish potential challenges of the transition period from college student to college graduate.

- Being asked the questions like if you have a job lined up or if ones applied yet
- Questions don't stop

- Lots of pressure of continuing education like grad school, etc

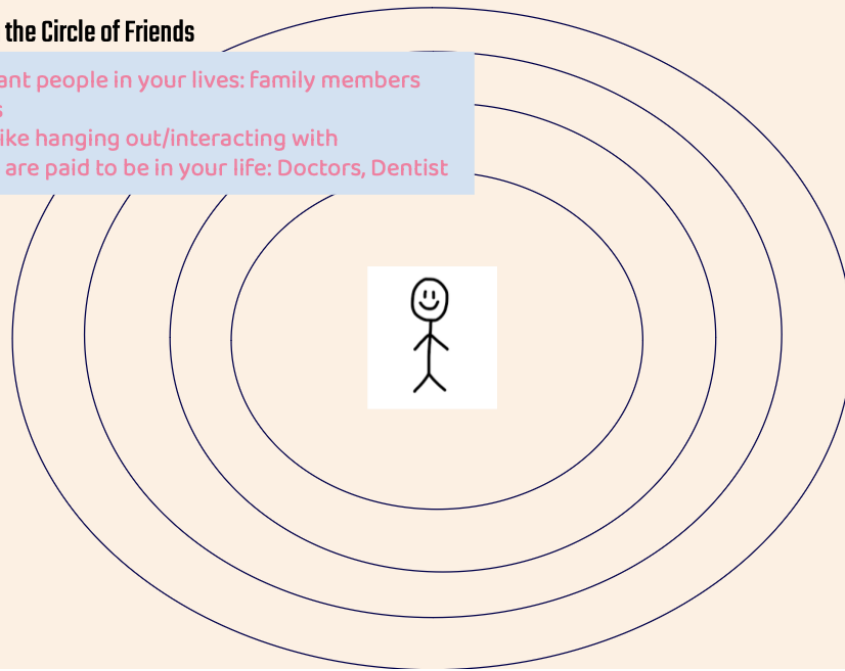
- Challenge of feeling pressured or lost

Dealing with Expectations

- As you come close to graduating you might be asked by many THE question
- These conversations are unintentionally loaded with unrealistic expectations
- Current job market in many fields tight and competitive
- Expectations of success come from people in our support circle
- Can be motivating but can bring a fear of failure, self doubt and sense of shame of not meeting these expectations

Building Community with the Circle of Friends

1st circle: most important people in your lives: family members
2nd circle: Best friends
3rd circle: people you like hanging out/interacting with
4th circle: People who are paid to be in your life: Doctors, Dentist



Coping with Support

Finding and maintaining social support can be super helpful in overcoming anxiety challenges, mental health challenges and stress during this transition

- Stay Connected- Even if you're not in the same community, stay connected with friends and classmates. Make it a point to text, chat, video chat as often. Normal for friendships to shift and change
- Form New Connections- Rather than avoiding new people, make yourself visible, get to know new people and be active with those you like.
- You might find that your contact might decrease as you form new connections
- Forge your direction- create a plan of action for the months ahead with goals, realistic budget, and actions needed if moving
- Maintain and Identify new interests- activities and college has ended

What are some forms of social support in the transition away from college?

- My family have been so supportive all the way through this transition with me.
- Guidance from current professors
- Gathering with those closest to you

Workforce!

- Graduation is right around the corner but not too late to start now
- Start exploring positions that align with your own interest
 - Indeed, ZipRecruiter, Glassdoor, etc
- Good idea to hone down your skills as different industries are changing
- Spend time building professional relationships
 - Advisors, professors, previous employers,
 - Anyone that has supported you and can share that you are graduating soon and looking for employment in May
- Update Resume
- Buff up interview skills

To Conclude

- Dealing with graduation anxiety is a normal reaction to uncertainty especially if you thrive on order and familiarity
- Many people experience anxiety as they try to find meaningful employment in their field of choice and adjust to the responsibilities of adulthood

To recap on how to deal with graduation anxiety

- Stay connected
- Form new connections
- Find new interests
- Plan for action

- Avoid unhealthy coping strategies
 - Unhealthy eating habits, substance use, emotional spending, social withdraw, etc

- College graduation is an incredible accomplishment to be proud of and full new potential
- You can take charge of your wellbeing and begin adulthood with purpose and positivity

