

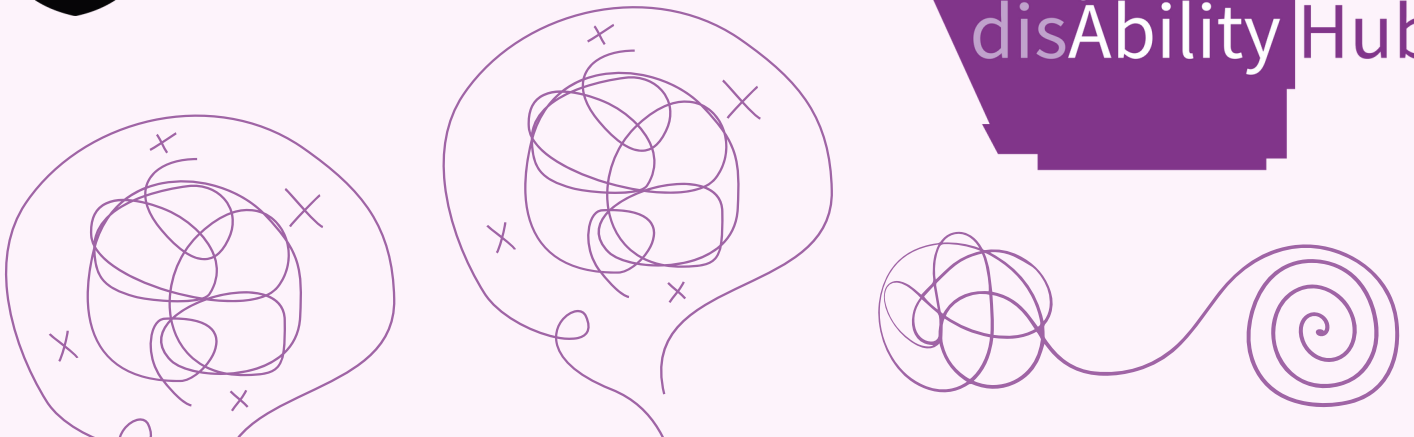


**Trinity College Dublin**

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Trinity  
**disAbility Hub**



# **Beyond the Mask of Calm**

## **Student Journeys Through Anxiety**



# Introduction



## **Declan Treanor**

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In the bustling hallways of universities worldwide, countless stories unfold. Stories of ambition, hope, success, and failure. Among these, there's a narrative that often goes unnoticed – the tales of students who grapple with anxiety. While some wear it openly, others shroud it beneath a mask of smiles, concealing their internal battles. The spectrum of anxiety is vast and complex; everyone feels anxious from time to time. However, there's a profound difference between fleeting moments of nervousness and the debilitating experience of Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) or other anxiety-related conditions.

Regrettably, there's an overarching sentiment in society that often dismisses these profound experiences. "We all get anxious," some say, attempting to equate everyday worries with clinical anxiety, inadvertently undermining the genuine challenges many students face. Such statements, while possibly well-intentioned, can perpetuate ignorance and stigma, leaving those affected feeling isolated and misunderstood.

In the context of these narratives, the biopsychosocial model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors contributing to the experience of anxiety among students. Biologically, anxiety can be linked to genetic predispositions, neurochemistry, and physiological responses that vary from person to person. Psychologically, the coping mechanisms, personal histories, and individual thought patterns of these students deeply affect their experience and management of anxiety. Socially, the environment of a university—with its academic pressures, social dynamics, and often competitive culture—can significantly influence, and at times exacerbate, the levels of anxiety students endure.

By integrating the biopsychosocial model into our comprehension of student anxiety, we can begin to

appreciate the full scope of challenges these individuals face. It is not enough to simply recognize the presence of anxiety; we must understand the root causes and contributing factors across all dimensions of their lives. This holistic approach underscores the importance of multi-faceted support systems that address biological sensitivities, provide psychological support, and create socially nurturing environments.

Therefore, this collection not only shares the stories of students coping with anxiety but also serves as a clarion call for a more nuanced and empathetic approach to mental health in academic settings. By applying the biopsychosocial model, educators, peers, and mental health professionals can collaborate to create interventions and support networks that acknowledge the complexity of anxiety. It is through this comprehensive lens that we can better support students in managing their anxiety, not just as a transient state but as a condition shaped by a spectrum of biopsychosocial factors. Through such understanding and action, the hope is to transform university hallways into spaces of greater inclusivity, understanding, and wellness for all students.

**Declan Treanor**  
disAbility Service Director

# What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an overwhelming flow of feelings within and around oneself. It can present itself emotionally – making someone feel like they cannot complete a task such as a problem set or a test or a long trip. It can present itself physically – via heart palpitations or sweating or the feeling of adrenaline pumping through your body. It can be a part of the “fight or flight” response, or it can just be a feeling like you don’t want to keep going or are scared about the present or future.



Dear Readers,

As you delve into these stories, we invite you to approach them with empathy and an open heart. Students from Trinity College Dublin have bravely shared their experiences and journeys of living with and coping with anxiety.

These narratives are a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. While some content may be distressing, we hope these stories inspire understanding, compassion, and a broader awareness of the battles that many silently endure.

Warmest regards,

**Declan Treanor**  
disAbility Service Director





## **Emma's Story - English Student**

Emma had a profound love for words. Their power to evoke emotions, paint vivid images, and transport readers to distant realms was what made her choose English Literature as her major. Stepping onto the university campus, her heart brimmed with excitement and dreams of delving deeper into the literary world. Yet, as the semesters rolled on, the mounting pressures of deadlines and the lofty expectations of professors began to overshadow her initial enthusiasm.

The nights that once echoed with the lyrical prose of her favourite authors now resounded with her own anxious thoughts.

Each essay she penned became an ordeal, as she obsessively reread and scrutinised every sentence, paralysed by the fear of criticism or failure. But beneath this academic stress lay a deeper, more personal turmoil. Emma was grappling with PTSD, a harrowing aftermath of a severe assault she had endured.

This trauma manifested in various ways. Emma found herself avoiding certain situations or places that triggered painful memories. She developed compulsive behaviours, often double-checking doors or windows, driven by an irrational fear for her safety. Social interactions became increasingly challenging, as she navigated conversations with a guarded heart, always wary of revealing too much or getting too close. Alongside therapy, she was prescribed antidepressants to manage the overwhelming emotions and flashbacks.

One day, amidst a particularly challenging week, Emma found solace in a study group session. As they discussed their strategies to manage academic pressures, a fellow student mentioned "time-blocking" - a method of allocating specific hours in the day to dedicated tasks. It might seem rudimentary, but for someone like Emma, who felt perpetually adrift in a sea of tasks and trauma, this method offered a beacon of structure.



With a hint of scepticism but a whole lot of hope, Emma decided to try it out. She meticulously charted out her day, dedicating blocks of time to reading, writing, taking breaks, therapy sessions, and even moments of leisure. This newfound regimen not only instilled a sense of order to her academic responsibilities but also provided her with predictable pockets of respite amidst her healing journey.

With the combined efforts of therapy, medication, and her time-blocking technique, Emma found a way to navigate the labyrinth of her university years. Her journey was neither linear nor easy, but it was a testament to her resilience and determination. Through her struggles and successes, Emma's story serves as a poignant reminder that healing is a journey, and sometimes, simple strategies can make all the difference.

## **PTSD. What is it?**

PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, is a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. It can lead to symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety. College students may be particularly susceptible due to various stressors and experiences during this transitional life stage.



## **Raj - Computer Science Student**

From a young age, Raj had a knack for understanding computers. The intricacies of coding and the satisfaction of problem-solving drove him to pursue a degree in Computer Science. Yet, the transition from high school to college was harder than he had ever anticipated. Group projects, in particular, became a source of immense dread. Being autistic, Raj had always grappled with social nuances and cues that others found natural. Add to that his anxiety, and the challenges of integrating into college life seemed magnified.

Physically, the effects were unmistakable. There were days when Raj's heart would race so fast that he could hear its thudding in his ears,

moments where a cold sweat would form on his forehead when asked a question, and times when he'd find himself gasping for breath in the middle of a presentation. The palpable tension in his shoulders and the regular onset of migraines were undeniable indicators of his mounting stress. He often caught himself fidgeting, tapping his foot uncontrollably, or biting his nails, worried that his peers would notice these signs and deem him unfit for team tasks.

The looming question was always there: Would his team approve of his code? What if, among the array of brilliant minds, he became the weak link?

One day, during a particularly overwhelming group meeting, Raj felt an impending anxiety attack. He excused himself, seeking refuge in a quiet corner of the university's library. There, he came across a book on mindfulness meditation. Intrigued, he began to leaf through it, absorbing its principles.

Initially, he was doubtful. How could the mere act of sitting quietly, focusing on one's breath, help with the whirlwind of code-related anxieties that consumed him?

Yet, the book's emphasis on being present, on grounding oneself in the current moment, resonated deeply with Raj.

Deciding to give it a shot, Raj started practicing mindfulness meditation for just ten minutes a day. To his surprise, those moments of stillness began to provide a much-needed clarity. The racing thoughts slowed, the constant fear of judgment began to wane, and the physical symptoms - the racing heart, the cold sweats - became less frequent.

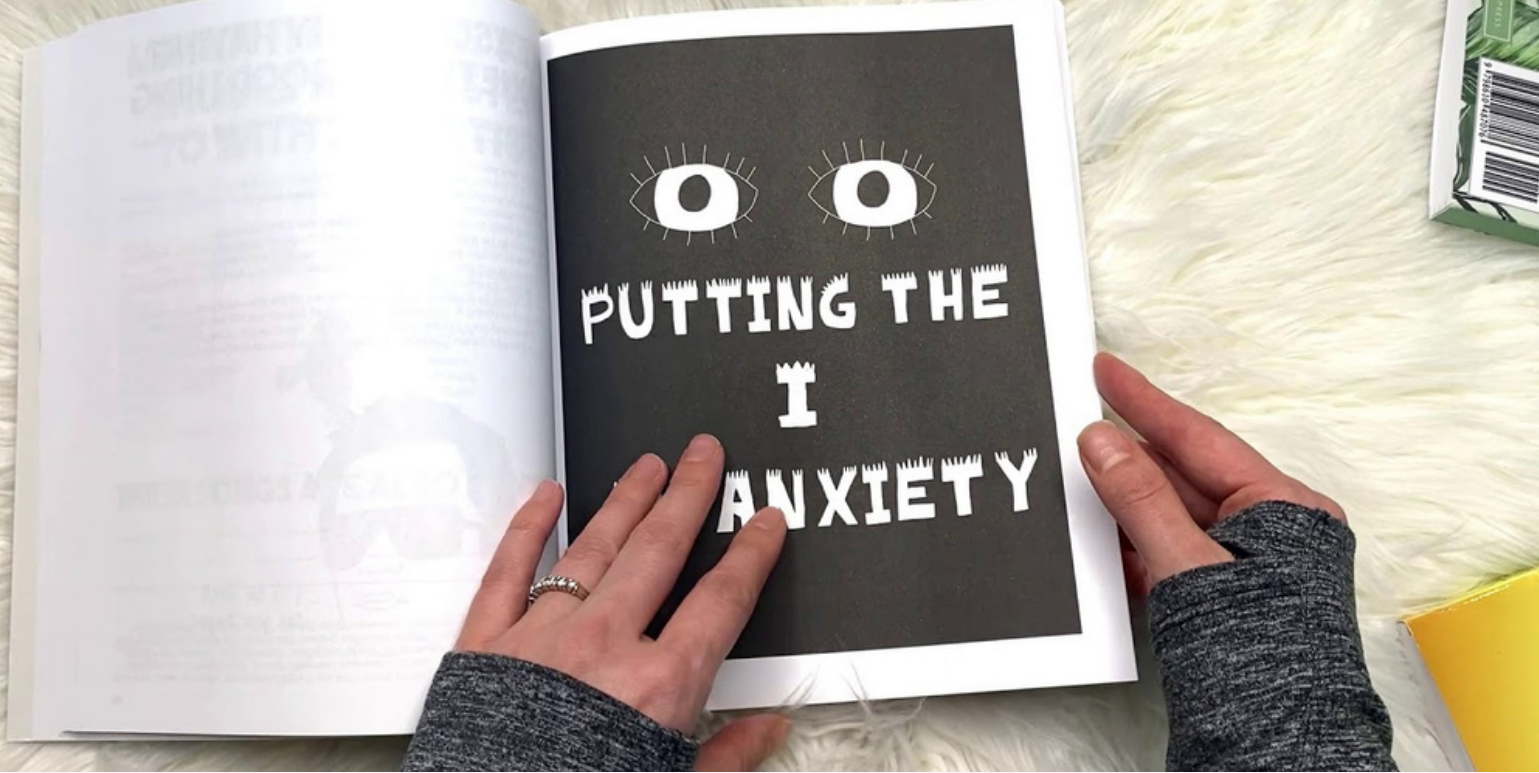
Raj also joined a support group on campus for neurodiverse students. There, he shared his experiences and learned coping strategies from peers with similar challenges. They introduced him to sensory tools like stress balls and fidget spinners, which he started carrying around. Whenever he felt overwhelmed, he would squeeze the stress ball, grounding himself.

As weeks turned into months, Raj's meditation mat became more than just a prop; it was his sanctuary, a place of solace and reflection. He learned the art of self-compassion, realising that his unique perspective as an autistic individual brought value to his group projects.

By year's end, not only had Raj managed to navigate his courses with more confidence, but he also became a beacon of hope and support for other students battling anxiety. He started conducting mindfulness sessions, sharing the transformative power of stillness, and ensuring that others too found their sanctuary amidst the chaos of college life.

## **Stress & Anxiety. What is it?**

Anxiety and stress refers to the feelings of unease, worry, and tension that often arise from academic pressures, social challenges, and the transition to independence. These emotions can manifest as physical symptoms, impact academic performance, and influence overall well-being during their college journey.



## **Sofia - Medical Student**

Sofia's dream had always been to help others. With her compassionate heart and unyielding determination, a career in medicine was not just an ambition—it was a calling. However, as she began her intensive medical training, the weight of her responsibilities became overwhelmingly palpable. Every test felt like a judgment on her capabilities, and each diagnosis during her practical's was imbued with the gravity of a potential life-or-death decision.

To add to the pressure, Sofia was battling mental health difficulties. She was on medication to manage her symptoms, but one of the side effects was a blurring of concentration.

This lapse in focus, especially in the fast-paced world of medicine, exacerbated her feelings of anxiety. It wasn't long before she experienced her first panic attack—a terrifying ordeal where her heart raced uncontrollably, her palms sweated, and a feeling of impending doom enveloped her.

One day, after a particularly gruelling round of practical's, Sofia found herself sitting beside a fellow student, Ella, in the university's garden. As they spoke, Sofia tentatively shared her struggles with anxiety and the debilitating effects of her medication. Ella listened intently, then shared a piece of advice that had helped her through tough times. She suggested Sofia try keeping a "Gratitude Journal." It involved noting down three things she was grateful for at the end of each day, regardless of how insignificant they might seem.

Initially sceptical, Sofia decided to give it a try. The first entries were simple: "Grateful for the sunshine today," "Grateful for the supportive words of a lecturer," "Grateful for a patient's smile." But as days turned into weeks, this nightly ritual began to shift Sofia's perspective. While the rigorous demands of medical school remained unchanged, her approach to them evolved.

Instead of being consumed by anxiety, she found herself anchored by moments of joy, progress, and gratitude. The journal became a beacon, reminding her of the good amidst the challenges.

Recognising the need for more structured support, Sofia also reached out to the university's wellness centre. There, she was introduced to an occupational therapist who specialised in supporting students with mental health challenges.

With her guidance, Sofia learned techniques to manage her anxiety, such as deep breathing exercises and grounding methods. They even explored potential adjustments to her medication to mitigate its side effects on her concentration.

With the combined power of her Gratitude Journal, the coping strategies she learned, and the unwavering support from her occupational therapist and peers, Sofia was able to navigate the tumultuous waters of her medical training. Her journey was a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of seeking help, forging connections, and focusing on gratitude amidst adversity.



## **A Gratitude Journal. What is it?**

A Gratitude Journal is a personal diary where students jot down daily moments of appreciation, helping them stay grounded, relieve stress, and focus on the positive aspects of their academic journey.



## **Liam – Drama and Theatre Student**

Liam was the epitome of boundless enthusiasm and creativity. The world was his canvas, and he painted it with his vivid imaginations. As a Drama and Theatre student, he was passionate about bringing stories to life, be it through his sketches or his mesmerising performances. Yet, despite his apparent confidence, the underbelly of his college life told a different story.

Each artwork, every script he wrote, felt like a testament to his abilities—and inevitably, up for public scrutiny and judgment. Anxiety would often grip him, especially before a performance.

His hands would shake, a cold sweat would break out, and an overwhelming doubt would cloud his mind, making him question his talent. Liam's specific phobia was centered around stage performances—an intense fear that was paralyzing. The spotlight, instead of being a beacon of his talent, felt like an interrogating glare, spotlighting his every flaw.

Furthermore, Liam grappled with OCD-type tendencies, particularly revolving around his scripts. He'd often find himself re-reading lines multiple times, trapped in a loop of checking and rechecking. This compulsion was not borne out of a desire for perfection, but rather from a fear that he might have missed something—a fear that was more paralyzing than productive.

Then, during a particularly challenging week leading up to a significant performance, Liam confided in a trusted professor about his anxieties. He spoke of his fears, his compulsions, and his phobias. The professor listened patiently and then introduced him to the "Pomodoro Technique." It was a simple yet effective method: Work with intense focus for 25 minutes and then take a 5-minute break.

Initially, Liam was hesitant. How could such a simple technique help him tackle his deep-seated anxieties? But, willing to try anything, he gave it a shot. The results were surprisingly transformative.

Those short, regular breaks became his moments of grounding. They offered him the space to breathe, stretch, centre himself, and remind himself of his capabilities. Most importantly, they gave him a sense of control over his work and his fears.

Over time, using this technique, Liam began to see a shift not just in his productivity but in his overall mental well-being. The trembling hands before performances reduced, the compulsive re-reading decreased, and while the anxiety never disappeared entirely, it became manageable.

Liam's journey, like that of so many students, was one of learning, self-discovery, and resilience. His story, along with others, underlines the pervasive nature of anxiety. But more importantly, it shines a light on the myriad ways individuals can harness their strengths, employ strategies, and thrive despite their challenges.

## **OCD-type Tendencies. What is it?**

OCD-type tendencies refer to repetitive behaviours or thoughts that students may engage in, often driven by intense anxieties or the need for perfection, even if they haven't been diagnosed with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. These tendencies can affect study habits, daily routines, and interactions on campus.



## **Chris's Awakening:**

### A Journey of Self-Discovery

In the historic halls of Trinity, Chris, a final year engineering computer science student, had his life unravel in ways he had never imagined. Originally from a quiet rural area, Chris had grown up accustomed to blending into the background. School had been a challenge, not academically, but socially. The cacophony of playground chatter, the unspoken nuances of teenage interaction, they all eluded him. To mask his discomfort and buy time during awkward conversations, he would often yawn — a unique defence mechanism. This earned him some raised eyebrows and whispers of being 'rude' or 'disinterested'.

The transition from his rural life to college was like moving from a still pond to a raging river. Trinity was bustling with life, with students from various walks of life. Chris continued to use his well-practiced masks, hiding behind yawns and other subtle diversions. Yet, amidst the urban chaos, he found a tribe - a group of students who seemed to march to a different beat. Unbeknownst to Chris, they were fellow neurodivergent individuals, each with their own stories and coping mechanisms. They welcomed him into their fold, sensing perhaps a kindred spirit. However, Chris's mastery in masking made it hard for them to see his struggles immediately.

It was during this time that Chris's mental health began to falter. The pressures of academic life combined with the mysteries of social interaction weighed him down. It was the college's health department that intervened, noticing his deteriorating state. A vigilant mental health nurse, picking up on certain traits and patterns, recommended he see the college psychiatrist for an autism assessment.

The diagnosis was a revelation. Chris had Autism. This late revelation was a double-edged sword.

On one hand, it explained years of confusion, struggles, and the constant feeling of being an outsider. On the other, it introduced a new array of challenges and adjustments. But knowledge, they say, is power. For Chris, this newfound self-awareness became a tool.

He began to see his world with new eyes, understanding his quirks and challenges. He learned to appreciate his strengths, such as his uncanny ability to focus and his meticulous attention to detail, both hallmarks of his computer science expertise.

His peers, especially those who had unknowingly recognised a part of themselves in him, became his rock. One astute student even called out Chris's yawning tactic, helping him realize that he didn't always need to hide. The support didn't stop there.

In his final year, the college's disability officer began working with Chris, preparing him for the world outside Trinity's walls. They charted out strategies to manage his challenges, especially his struggle with deadlines, and plotted a path for his future. With his good grades and a supportive network, the world was now full of potential for Chris.



His journey, though unique, echoes the stories of countless others who navigate the world with hidden challenges. Chris's tale is a testament to the power of understanding, both of oneself and of others. It reminds us that beneath the masks we all wear, lies a story waiting to be told.

## **Autism. What is it?**

Autism is a neurological variation that affects communication, social interactions, and may come with unique strengths and challenges in academic and social settings.



# Conclusion

In every corner of our diverse educational institutions, anxiety silently thrives. It doesn't discriminate, affecting students from all backgrounds, disciplines, and walks of life. While the stories we've shared are but a tiny fraction of the myriad experiences out there, they underscore a vital truth: anxiety can be deeply debilitating, but with the right support, individuals can not only cope but also thrive.

Seeking help is not a sign of weakness; it's an act of courage. It is crucial to create an environment where discussing mental health, particularly anxiety, is not shrouded in stigma or misconceptions.

Dialogue is the first step toward understanding, and understanding is the foundation for compassion and effective support.

For anyone reading this, know that your feelings and experiences are valid. Anxiety may cast a shadow, but with appropriate interventions, community support, and personal resilience, that shadow can be lifted. If you or someone you know is facing these challenges, remember that help is available. It may come in the form of therapy, medication, support groups, or simple yet effective techniques like those highlighted in our student stories. The journey with anxiety may be tough, but with understanding and assistance, a fulfilling academic and personal life is entirely attainable. Let's continue this essential conversation and ensure that everyone receives the recognition and support they rightfully deserve.

If you are interested in telling your stories to help others then you can email **[askds@tcd.ie](mailto:askds@tcd.ie)**



Scan the QR code  
to read more  
Student Stories.



## Trinity Student Supports & Services

Your mental health and emotional well-being is important. We want to remind you to take care of yourself. You are not alone as you deal with problems affecting your health and wellness.

Trinity College Dublin has great resources to offer to ensure you are able to meet your needs.

The Trinity disAbility Service is here to help support and direct you to the correct resources. If you don't know where to begin or need to talk to someone familiar, you are always welcome to come talk with a **Trinity Disability Officer** or email [askds@tcd.ie](mailto:askds@tcd.ie)

Scan the QR code for  
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