Rising anxiety of students grips college campuses

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Anxiety has topped the list of psychological problems among college students for the past two years, deposing depression, the longtime No. 1 issue.

At the University of Florida, there is increasing demand - and a waiting list - for group therapy and groups such as "Taming the Anxious Mind."

"In the years that I have studied it, 1986 to 2001, anxiety has tripled," said Sherry Benton, UF's lead counselor.

UF counselors treated 4,500 students during the 2010-11 school year, she said.

Benton called the nationwide increase in anxiety an epidemic and pointed to environmental factors that could lead to it - separation from problem-solving parents and worries about a struggling economy and a bleaker world that awaits after graduation.

One counselor estimated that 1 in 4 college students are taking some kind of medication for their troubles.

At a recent meeting of university counseling directors attended by Nicole Ovedia, Lynn University's lead counselor, 77 percent reported that the number of students with psychological problems increased during the past year.

Anxiety can affect more than 30 percent of students who seek counseling at small colleges such as Lynn, which has 2,100 students in Boca Raton. But at large universities such as 29,000-student UF, anxiety complaints can come from more than 40 percent of those seeking counseling.

With many colleges and universities in the midst of finals, those numbers are even bigger.

"Most counseling centers are barely keeping up. The demand is exceeding their resources," said Dan Jones, president of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, which conducted the annual study in which anxiety topped the list of student problems.

"We're triaging them, deciding who's the most urgent. Sometimes in one day 15 new people come in," Jones said. "It breaks our hearts when we have no openings and have to send them away, tell them they will have to wait weeks."

During his career, Florida Atlantic University's Kirk Dougher has seen a rise in anxiety and depression.
"In the last 15 to 20 years we've seen an escalation in the degree of psychological struggles students are coming to the universities with," Dougher said.

Counselors have formed some theories on what could be causing the increased anxiety.

A grim economy lurks just outside campuses, and a grimmer world has intruded since the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 and Northern Illinois University in 2008. Today's college students came of age in the shadow of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Then there are "helicopter parents" who have hovered over their children since birth.

"Students with helicopter parents have not developed some of the self-soothing and coping skills because their parents tried so hard to solve their problems," Jones said. "They're used to having somebody pave the way for them. They have no tolerance for struggle, no tolerance for boredom. Now, for the first time, they're faced with solving their own problems, and it creates a lot of anxiety.

"Most of us have the symptoms of anxiety and depression, but the body kicks us back to the base level," said Jones, director of counseling centers at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C., where 70 students are on a waiting list for counseling. "When people have (more serious depression), their body doesn't kick them back to the base level."

Twenty-five percent of college students are taking some kind of psychotropic medication, Jones said, a number that has steadily grown for years.

The shooting tragedies - and the desire to avoid more like them - have created more vigilance among college faculties, said Jones, who is getting more frequent calls from professors who want to discuss students with troubling behavior.

Lynn's counseling center is one of many that have formed crisis teams to help identify troubled students before they get into deeper problems.

While Benton was at Kansas State University, it was easy to see how anxiety and depression were linked to changes in the surrounding world, including devastating floods and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, which Benton considers the equivalent of 9/11 for students from that region.

"Economic disaster and severe traumas affect a large portion of the population and undermine people's sense of security, the sense that they can plan on a future," Benton said. "Mood disorders, especially anxiety and depression, fluctuate with the sense of safety, security and hope."

UF will start a pilot program next year of online therapist-based Internet treatment that has been used with good results in Europe and Australia. The only other U.S. trial of the online program has been by the Department of Defense for troops with post-traumatic stress disorder.

If the pilot program works, Benton plans to expand it to the rest of the university.

"As effective as face-to-face therapy is, we can't treat everyone that way," Benton said. "(Online therapy) will allow us to treat twice as many people."