

# **ADVANCING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AND RESILIENCE IN ACCOUNTING STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to discuss the state of mental health in accounting education. Based on a survey of 250 students at a medium size AACSB accredited university, we identify causes of mental health problems such as stress and depression, and offer suggestions for university administrators and faculty in their goal to foster increased mental health awareness. Such an environment is not only conducive to a positive learning culture, but could also lead to a more passionate and engaged alumni base. Survey results indicated the biggest causes of stress for students are workload and concerns for grades. Paradoxically, only 2% of the respondents would approach a professor, and only 4% would approach an academic advisor when facing these struggles. These results suggest an opportunity for university officials and faculty to play a more

supportive role in the psychological and emotional well-being of students.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research has documented the stressful nature of the accounting profession (Smith et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2017). While most written work is focused on the accounting professional, this paper contributes to the existing literature by exploring the causes and impacts of mental health during one's undergraduate and graduate studies. Potential solutions and their impact will also be discussed for each step. Accounting educators have an important role in helping students cultivate effective coping strategies (Henriques, 2014; Smith et al., 2020).

According to [mentalhealth.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.gov), mental health refers to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being. In recent years, mental health awareness in the United States has become more mainstream in the news, on college campuses, and in the workplace (Harding, 2018). According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2017), young adults aged 18-25 have the highest prevalence of mental illness.

The importance of mental health for accountants begins early on as stressors mount with difficult accounting programs, rigorous preparation for professional exams, and demanding work schedules in public accounting. The mental health conversation is more than a personal health problem. It can affect the success and reputation of a team, business, or educational institution. Accountants need the tools, resources, support, and confidence to address these struggles. Mental health professionals suggest several techniques, if developed early in one's career, to better overcome challenges (Chang & Stone, 2019; Nielson et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). We attempt to increase the awareness of mental health challenges in the accounting profession and suggest coping mechanisms for students, those sitting for the CPA exam, and early career professionals.

## LITERTURE REVIEW

While many professionals deal with stress on a regular basis, there are unique attributes associated with a career in public accounting which contribute to a challenging work life balance. Especially during the busy season, when accountants work long hours and have frequent demanding deadlines. This can lead to conflict between home and work responsibilities, leaving little time for leisure activities (Fogarty et al., 2000; Sanders et al., 1995).

The stigma associated with mental illness in public accounting compounds struggles that can stem from the long work weeks and high levels of stress. The Charity Supporting Chartered Accountants' Well-Being identified that 33% of accountants frequently think about quitting their jobs (Age, 2018). Another survey found approximately 77% of accountants experience consistently high levels of work-related stress (Age, 2018). If not managed, this stress and overwork can lead to more serious and diagnosable mental illnesses, such as depression or anxiety. The pressure to finish heavy workloads under a time constraint decreases the quality of work while increasing strain on mental health (Chen et al., 2020, Jones et al., 2010). The significance for undergraduate students is that the workload compression does not ease in the years that follow.

Extant research has shown that stress is detrimental to mental health, negatively impacting concentration and academic performance while also increasing anxiety (Langner & Michael, 1963; Lo, 2002). It is an environmental influence with individual consequences that impact students' mental and physical health (Gibbons et al., 2011). Including forgetfulness, confusion, increased conflicts, isolation from friends and family, fatigue, and high blood pressure.

Stress is not unique to accounting students, but recent research has highlighted higher levels of stress and burnout among accounting students (Gabre & Kumar, 2012; Law, 2010; Lim et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2020). There is evidence that accounting students are more susceptible to mental health challenges. Brown et al. (2013) found that accounting students had a lower level of

narcissism than other business majors, as well as college-age students in general. Reasonable amounts of healthy narcissism help individuals' better balance personal needs with attending to the needs of others (Morrison, 1997). Research has shown accounting students have lower self-esteem than other business students (Farag & Elias, 2016; Fortin & Amernic, 1994).

Managing stress has consistently rated as one of the most important issues CPA firms face (AICPA 2019). Likewise, the concern for mental health among college students is increasing. In a survey of approximately 450,000 students at 452 different American Universities over the past seven years, researchers found the diagnosis or treatment of anxiety increased 6%, while depression diagnoses increased by 3% (Oswalt et al., 2018). Results also demonstrated a 30% increase in students reaching out to campus mental health services (Oswalt et al., 2018). The data from this study aligns itself with the trend of increasing the effort to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness (Holland, 2016). Despite the increase in the number of students reaching out for help, the stigma associated with mental illness is still prominent. In order to overcome this, a culture must be created where people feel safe reaching out (Holland, 2016).

## **RESEARCH AND RESULTS**

Nearly 250 undergraduate and graduate accounting students were surveyed in regard to their mental health. 84 responded through an online survey. 32% of the respondents were seniors, 24% juniors, 20% graduate students, and 20% sophomores. There was an even 50-50 split between female and male respondents. 74% of our sample reported no pre-existing mental health conditions prior to coming to college. The survey defined mental health problems to include conditions such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, bipolar, personality disorders, schizophrenia, and psychosis. In line with the stigma associated with mental illnesses, 95% of respondents who had pre-existing mental health conditions, did not declare it on their university application form.

Concerning for accounting educators are the results that 54% of the students developed mental illnesses while in school, and a majority of them are not comfortable reaching out to their professors or academic advisors. There appears to be some fear among the students that they will be judged, and professors will think they can't handle the major or workload. This is consistent with the stigma surrounding mental health issues in the accounting profession. Combined, these results suggest opportunities for faculty and administrators to play a role in the well-being of students. In the open-ended questions, one survey response indicated that they struggled with anxiety for the first time while in college. "In my darkest hour, I reached out to my advisors and it appeared they didn't know how to handle the situation. I wish staff were more aware of the signs and were more active in worrying about their students' mental health." Professors and advisors could play a more active role by purposely scheduling meetings with each student and advisees. Instead of having normal office hours where usually only the motivated students participate, purposely scheduling each student could improve rapport and help those most vulnerable.

### **Helping Combat Mental Illness on Campuses**

The first step in combating mental health in the classroom is decreasing the stigma associated with it. The complexity of mental illness does not lessen its reality. Professionals speak of diseases of the mind including paranoia, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder, along with the more common anxiety and depression. Baffling as they may be, these conditions are realities of life the severity of which can limit an individual's capacity to function, and it is critical that there is no more shame in acknowledging them than recognizing a disease that ravages the body as much as diabetes or cancer. On the other hand, everyone will have discouraging moments or feel anxious and downhearted at times. We have all faced deadlines, felt fear, and gripping pressure that comes when we realize that there may not be enough time to finish what needs to be done.

As educators we cannot be overwhelmed by the broad spectrum of the disease, or the limitations inherent in attempting to mitigate it. However, there are proactive steps that should be taken to prepare students. By helping students adapt to normal pressures associated with university expectations, progress can be made. We want them to identify and watch for the stress indicators in themselves and others they may be able to help. By being alert to rising pressures and depletion, we can make adjustments.

Professors can reduce the stigma associated with mental illness with a little more compassion. It is important to openly discuss the possible stressors associated with the course. By establishing clear expectations early in the semester students can allocate the necessary time and attention to the course. Address course specific study strategies such as replacing rereading with self-quizzing or working problems in smaller blocks of time. Consider giving frequent low stakes formative assessments that allow students to receive feedback and monitor their progress. These techniques will help students to not become overwhelmed.

Some universities require a course addressing preparation for the profession that contains a work life balance component. Others have successfully integrated semester long “your best self” assignments into required courses. In these, students report weekly on the completion of physical, mental, and professional interaction goals. Though students aren't required to specifically discuss their physical or mental successes/failures, many students appear to find comfort in sharing their experiences and receiving words of encouragement. Preparation for the CPA exam is another area of concern. With a pass rate around 50%, pressure can negatively affect a student's mental health. Fears of failing, the constant studying, or isolation from family and friends can be taxing. A person planning to sit for the CPA exam should take precautions to prepare themselves for the academic and mental rigor. Having a cohort of students preparing for the same exam helps them recognize that they are not alone. Prep courses can encourage students to get together for regular recreational and social activities.

Faculty and students should be familiar with their university crisis hotline. There is also a national suicide prevention hotline or text line that provides free confidential support (800-273-8255 or text HOME to 741741). Some may never feel comfortable reaching out in person, they may fear embarrassment, or judgment (Henriques, G., 2014). By providing both in-person and anonymous options, students with different preferences access to help. Campus health services can be a support system by providing encouragement, a listening ear, or tips on how they overcame their struggles (Skoulding, L., 2018). They can make all the difference in the mental health, reputation, and morale of a university.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many accountants follow a similar path from undergraduate programs, to the CPA exam, to public accounting. By identifying and analyzing the causes and impacts of mental illness along the path, we can combat the disease and help individuals maximize their potential.

The need to maintain mental health in the accounting field makes conversations that lead to actions critical. As things get worse, educators need to get better. Even though the battle against mental illness is a personal one, it doesn't mean that people have to go through it alone. Decreasing the mental illness stigma will give people the confidence to reach out for help and support throughout an accounting career. An increase in awareness will help educators establish resources and better recognize symptoms early on. A mental health focus can better prepare students to handle the stress of classes, the CPA exam, and their career.

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