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Exam Anxiety and Mental Health among UAE Students: Applying Freud and Jung to Family Guidance and Close Peer Coping

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ABSTRACT

Pre-examination anxiety represents a pervasive clinical and educational challenge among secondary and university students, impairing working memory, emotional regulation, and academic performance. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where rapid educational modernization intersects with strong familial academic expectations, empirical surveys report clinically elevated anxiety in over half of undergraduate students. While behavioral models dominate contemporary literature, depth psychology offers critical explanatory power regarding the unconscious intrapsychic roots of evaluative dread. This short review synthesizes Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche and signal anxiety with Carl Jung's concepts of the Persona, Shadow, and complexes to elucidate the psychodynamics of examination distress. High-stakes assessments activate a punitive Superego and threaten an over-identified academic Persona, triggering somatic hyperarousal and cognitive inhibition. To mitigate these conflicts, the review examines a dual relational buffer: authoritative family guidance and close peer ("bestie") coping. Drawing on empirical studies from the UAE, family cohesion and high parental warmth paired with realistic expectations moderate Superego harshness, while close peer confidants provide horizontal emotional validation that facilitates Shadow integration and stress buffering. Integrating Freudian and Jungian insights with culturally attuned family guidance and structured peer support frameworks provides clinicians, educators, and policymakers with a holistic strategy to safeguard student mental health in the UAE and beyond.

Keywords: Exam anxiety; Student mental health; Sigmund Freud; Carl Jung; Parenting styles; Peer support; United Arab Emirates

INTRODUCTION

Examinations serve as primary gatekeepers to higher education, scholarship retention, and career mobility, yet they frequently precipitate acute psychological distress. Test anxiety is characterized by a constellation of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral responses, including intrusive worry, autonomic hyperarousal, and cognitive interference, triggered by fear of negative evaluation or failure. Globally, epidemiological evidence

demonstrates a consistent inverse relationship between elevated test anxiety and academic achievement, alongside heightened vulnerability to comorbid depressive symptoms. Within the United Arab Emirates (UAE), student mental health has emerged as a national priority aligned with the *UAE National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031*, which emphasizes psychological resilience and strong family cohesion. Empirical investigations across UAE higher education institutions underscore the urgency of this focus. A cross-sectional survey of undergraduate students in Sharjah reported a 55% overall prevalence of anxiety, exceeding rates of depression (38%) and general stress (29%), with higher vulnerability observed among female students (61% vs. 47% in males), first-year undergraduates (61.7%), and scholarship recipients (64.4%). Similarly, clinical assessments of UAE university students using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD 7) scale revealed mild anxiety in 44.2% and moderate to severe anxiety in 32.2% of participants. Among health sciences students in Ajman, 43% exhibited high test anxiety on the Westside Test Anxiety Scale, particularly during early academic years and practical evaluations. While behavioral and cognitive interference models explain *how* worry disrupts attention during exams, they rarely address *why* evaluative settings provoke existential dread. Depth psychology, specifically the foundational frameworks of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, illuminates the unconscious intrapsychic and relational dynamics underlying examination stress, offering actionable pathways for family guidance and close peer coping.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EXAMINATION STRESS: FREUDIAN AND JUNGIAN FORMULATIONS

Freudian Structural Conflict and Signal Anxiety

In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), Sigmund Freud reconceptualized anxiety not merely as transformed libidinal tension, but as an adaptive *signal* generated by the Ego when anticipating an internal or external danger situation, most notably the threatened loss of the object's love or the approval of the Superego. In an academic context, an upcoming examination functions as a symbolic tribunal. When parental or societal worth is conditional upon grades, the student's internal Superego assumes a punitive posture, equating academic underperformance with moral failure and withdrawal of affection.

Caught between the Id's desire for relief from strenuous study, the external reality of the examination, and the Superego's perfectionistic demands, the Ego experiences signal anxiety. To defend against overwhelming unpleasure, the Ego mobilizes defense mechanisms such as repression, rationalization, or avoidance. These defenses manifest clinically as procrastination, "blanking out" during recall, and somatic complaints including gastrointestinal distress, insomnia, and palpitations. Freud explicitly noted that neurotic anxiety restricts Ego functioning through *inhibitions*; during testing, cognitive inhibition directly impairs working memory retrieval, creating a reinforcing cycle of panic and underperformance.

Jungian Analytical Psychology: Persona, Shadow, and Complexes

Carl Jung's analytical psychology complements Freud's structural model by situating exam anxiety within the tension between conscious social adaptation and unconscious wholeness. Jung defined the Persona as the functional interface between the individual and society. High achieving students frequently identify closely with the Persona of the "flawless scholar" or "dutiful child." Exam anxiety intensifies when the student fears that a poor grade will shatter this outward mask, exposing perceived inadequacy to parents, peers, and teachers. Material incompatible with the academic Persona, such as self-doubt, intellectual fatigue, envy, or fear of failure, is relegated to the Shadow. Rather than disappearing, unintegrated Shadow elements coalesce into an emotionally charged "failure complex" or "success complex." As exam dates approach, autonomous complexes hijack conscious attention, producing intrusive catastrophic imagery. Furthermore, Jung's typology highlights how stress disrupts cognitive balance: students who rely exclusively on rigid conscious routines, such as mechanical rote memorization without intuitive synthesis or emotional processing, experience acute psychic exhaustion when confronted with complex clinical or analytical exam formats.

Psychodynamic Construct	Theorist	Examination Manifestation	Relational Antidote
Punitive Superego and Signal Anxiety	S. Freud	Perfectionism, fear of losing parental love, somatic hyperarousal, and cognitive recall inhibition.	Authoritative parenting providing unconditional warmth alongside realistic structure.
Over-Identified Persona	C. G. Jung	Rigid attachment to the "top student" mask; acute dread of public or familial shame.	Authentic self-disclosure with a trusted close peer ("best friend") free from evaluative hierarchy.
Repressed Shadow and Complexes	C. G. Jung	Intrusive self-doubt, sudden emotional overwhelm, and autonomous "failure complexes."	Empathetic peer normalization and reflective dialogue that integrate vulnerability into consciousness.

OVERCOMING EXAM ANXIETY THROUGH FAMILY GUIDANCE AND CLOSE PEER COPING

Family Guidance and Cultural Dynamics in the UAE

From a psychodynamic standpoint, parenting establishes the foundational emotional climate that shapes Superego severity and Ego resilience. Diana Baumrind's classical typology distinguishes *authoritative* parenting (high warmth, rational communication, clear standards) from *authoritarian* parenting (high control, low warmth, punitive compliance) and *permissive* styles. Cross-cultural research consistently links authoritarian control and parental overprotection to heightened perfectionism, harsh Superego internalization, and elevated test anxiety in university students.

In the UAE, family structure serves as a central pillar of adolescent and young adult socialization. Empirical research among UAE students by Alsheikh et al. demonstrates that while high parental expectations ("demandingness") correlate positively with academic achievement, **family cohesion** and supportive effort are critical determinants of healthy educational adjustment. Crucially, UAE undergraduate data indicate that students living within supportive family environments exhibit significantly lower anxiety prevalence (53.4% living with family; 38.5% living off campus) compared to students residing in isolated campus accommodations (64.3%).

To transform family guidance into an effective buffer against exam anxiety, parents in the UAE can adopt three psychodynamically informed practices:

1. **Decoupling Love from Grades:** Explicitly affirming unconditional parental regard softens the student's punitive Superego, shifting exam preparation from fear driven survival to Ego directed mastery.
2. **Cultivating Authoritative Dialogue:** Replacing coercive comparison with collaborative goal setting honors traditional respect for family guidance while strengthening the student's autonomous Ego functioning.
3. **Regulating Home Emotional Climate:** Modeling calm routines, adequate sleep, and balanced nutrition during exam periods prevents parental anxiety from transferring into the student's internal world.
4.

Close Peer ("Best Friend") Coping and the Buffering Hypothesis

While family guidance anchors vertical security, close peer friendships, colloquially termed a "bestie" or primary confidant, provide an indispensable horizontal buffer during late adolescence and emerging adulthood. According to Cohen and Wills' stress buffering hypothesis, perceived availability of interpersonal support intervenes between an acute stressor and pathological anxiety by attenuating threat appraisal and bolstering coping self-efficacy. Psychodynamically, a trusted best friend operates as a safe psychological space where the student can lower their academic Persona. Unlike interactions with parents or professors, where power differentials encourage impression management, close peer dyads permit candid expression of Shadow anxieties, exhaustion, and self-doubt without fear of disappointing authority. Mutual disclosure normalizes examination vulnerability, dissolving the isolation that fuels neurotic complexes. Furthermore, structured peer assisted learning, including reciprocal quizzing and shared study schedules, channels anxious psychic energy into constructive Ego activity, reducing cognitive interference during examinations.[1-12]

CLINICAL AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UAE

Integrating psychodynamic understanding with social ecological support offers practical interventions for UAE schools, universities, and primary care clinicians:

- **University Counseling and Peer Mentoring Programs:** Higher education institutions in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah should pair clinical counseling with structured peer confidant ("buddy") networks,

particularly targeting first-year students, female cohorts, and scholarship holders who face elevated anxiety risks.

- **Parent Psychoeducation Workshops:** Engaging parents through university orientation and community health initiatives, aligned with the *UAE National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031*, can promote authoritative support strategies that preserve academic ambition without inducing Superego driven distress.
- **Holistic Clinical Screening:** When students present to medical or campus clinics with examination somatic symptoms, clinicians should screen for underlying test anxiety using validated tools such as the GAD 7 or Westside Test Anxiety Scale and explore both familial expectations and peer connectedness.

CONCLUSION

Examination anxiety is not merely a deficit in study skills; it is a complex psychodynamic event involving Freudian Superego pressure, signal anxiety, and Jungian tensions between an idealized academic Persona and a repressed Shadow. Evidence from the UAE highlights both the substantial prevalence of student anxiety and the protective value of cohesive family support. By combining warm, authoritative family guidance with authentic, supportive close peer relationships, educational and clinical frameworks can effectively buffer examination stress and foster enduring psychological resilience.

DECLARATIONS

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