

Q & A with Lexi, a Student with Anxiety



Lexi has been living with anxiety for most of her life but didn't register it as a disability until she was in college. She hopes instructors will practice empathy every day.

Could you tell me a little about yourself?

I am a senior majoring in communication. My career ambitions center around the world of public relations, but with a less sinister purpose than the industry usually has. I want to use the world of public relations to become involved with managing the philanthropic image of a company. Corporations control a lot of wealth, and therefore hold a lot of potential for change. I hope to one day use my communication skills to help a company use their resources for good while improving their social image.

I love to volunteer and have been doing it since I was young. I started off by singing in nursing homes as a child during the holidays, and eventually worked at an animal shelter. Once in college, I started tutoring at a non-profit that helps students at risk in math and English literacy. I hope to one day start my own foundation centered around expanding educational opportunities for women of color. I'm currently applying to graduate programs so I can further my knowledge of strategic communications, and perhaps eventually become a professor when I feel like I've had enough of the corporate world. I also play two instruments.

What 3 words would your closest friend use to describe you?

My friends would describe me as motivated, passionate, and dependable.

As you know, we're creating a website to help instructors best teach students with disabilities. Could you please tell me about your disability?

I've been dealing with my anxiety for as long as I can remember but didn't register it as a disability until I was in college and came to terms with it. I always thought of it as more of a personality trait than a disability, but it takes a toll on my everyday life more than I like to admit. I tend to worry about normal things like my personal relationships, academic performance, and even the mess in my apartment, but to an unhealthy level. When I don't succeed, it makes me feel physically sick and mentally drained, which is part of why I try so hard in everything I do.

Can you please describe how your disability has influenced your academic experience in general?

In a strange way, my academic performance has overall benefited from my obsessive need to do well. It's added to my drive, and I try to see it as a strength rather than a weakness to help me cope. However, in subjects that don't come naturally to me or I don't see improvement with hard work, I feel debilitated. When I start losing momentum in what I'm learning, I start to become anxious and feel an overwhelming sense of dread or hopelessness.

More specifically, how has your disability affected your experience with math and statistics?

In most subjects, I'm able to cope with the pressure I put on myself by using healthy coping mechanisms like fitness, yoga, and meditation. With math, it's always been a never-ending struggle with no end in sight. **Most of the teachers I've had in math basically implied it just wasn't my thing. I found it frustrating when I was normally on par with my peers in other subjects, and in math I always felt behind.** I would finally understand a concept and we'd already be moving onto the next thing. I tested highly in math aptitude when I was younger, and never felt like I had a learning problem in math itself, which is why it was so infuriating. I feel like I could've done better looking back, but once I started feeling behind, I started attaching a feeling of doom to the subject entirely. I have what my friends call "math anxiety" because I now assume that I can't do math and will never be good at it or understand it. I recently took a math exemption test for a general education requirement I needed to satisfy in college, and it was the first math exam I was taking in years. I felt more stress for a pass/fail exemption test than I've felt for most major assignments in my college career. I found that when my friends went over the math that would be on the test with me, it actually clicked, and I was able to pass the test; It was the first victory I've felt in math in a long time.

What are some strategies you found helpful when learning math and statistics?

I'm a big reader and writer and tend to do better when I can visualize something. The step-by-step nature of algebra was easy for me follow and allowed me to plot out what was going on in each question. One of the scariest things for me was always multi-faceted word problems like compound interest, and when studying for my exemption test, I found breaking it down by steps

helped a lot. **One of the ways I deal with my anxiety about accomplishing tasks is by making check-lists or to-do lists. List-making in math has been extremely helpful because it allows me to plot out of a course of action for each question, and possibly see where I went wrong if I didn't get it right.**

Please describe things that a previous math or statistics instructor or instructors did that were helpful in learning the material.

The math subject I always seem to understand the best is algebra, and I attribute that to one of the only good math teachers I've ever had. **My algebra teacher always explained algebra as if it was going down a check list. Each step was accounted for, and she would go through the list with me when I was having trouble and was always able to pin point where I went wrong.** The acronym PEMDAS was really easy to understand for me because it was like a code breaker. Formulas like PEMDAS or $Y=mx+b$ that were straightforward and easy to plug the information into were always easy for me. I also had a math tutor for pre-calculus who was the only reason I made it through. He understood that I liked to visualize and understand each step to a question, and always wrote down and explained things to me using that format. He also taught me that flashcards are underutilized in math. In a subject where there are so many formulas and graphing calculator operations to remember, he said that flashcards help with the memorization aspect of knowing what formula to use. The flashcards helped tremendously because I have a really good memory, and even if I didn't get the final result right, I would always remember the formula and at least get partial credit for the question. **My tutor also identified how math made me nervous and was extremely reassuring and would tell me success stories he had about other students with similar issues. It made me feel like I wasn't alone, and he didn't try to blame my difficulties on a lack of talent.**

Please describe things that a previous math or statistics instructor or instructors did that were not helpful in learning the material.

I had multiple math teachers who told me math just wasn't my thing; I think the dread I attached to math had to a lot with this. Once I had it in my head that I just wasn't good at math and never would be, it stuck with me forever. The school district I was in growing up prided itself on being advanced in math and put all students a year ahead in math once in middle school. I never thought about the fact that I was learning at an accelerated pace, and the minority of students who couldn't handle it were put in easier math classes and were ridiculed by other students for being in "stupid math." **I never wanted to feel like I was behind my peers, especially because I was normally an above-average student and insisted on staying in accelerated math all the**

way through until graduation. The competitive environment fostered a sense of inadequacy in any student who struggled in math. Unfortunately, the teachers shared the fast-paced mentality and instead of working individually with students who struggled they would just tell the parents to stick the student with a tutor basically giving up themselves.

What advice would you give to math and statistics instructors who are going to work with students with a disability like yours?

I would tell teachers to find out what is causing the anxiety around learning math. I wish that I had identified the cause earlier and never became accustomed to learned helplessness in math. I now realize that the panic around math made it harder to get through topics I didn't understand because of the feeling I never would. **I would say to never tell a student they're not gifted in math and find what works for students who are struggling.** The step-by-step visualizing was something that not only helped me, but I could see being a good method for other math learners with anxiety around math. Part of my panic stems from feeling lost in the problem and tracking each facet of solving the problem relieves a lot of the "lost" feeling.

How do you suggest instructors create inclusive and accessible classrooms?

I would tell teachers to try and individualize their extra help sessions. For instance, someone like me might need a one-on-one approach to going through how to do a problem, so it may be beneficial to have appointments within extra helps sessions. Students can reserve a time slot of the allotted extra help time in advance to work with their teacher without the pressure of feeling dumb in front of other students. **I would also make clear to all the students that everyone learns differently, and that if the way it's being taught isn't working for them, to see them after class or in extra help to discuss how they learn best.** I know it's difficult to do in big classrooms or schools, but, in my experience, a lot of students don't use the extra help sessions, and it may encourage those who need it to actually come.

Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

I know it's hard to accommodate the individual needs of every student, but there are ways to try. The most important point to remember is that no two students learn the same way and getting to know your students as much as you can is crucial. I can say from experience that kids do want to learn and do well, and it's when they feel like it's hopeless that they start to retreat into themselves and stop trying. Never tell a kid that they're not talented in a subject or stick them with a tutor until you think you've done everything you can for them. **Practice empathy every day and always be mindful that this is something you've studied for years, and they're just learning it.** Always keep perspective and understand that learning is a group effort between student and teacher!