



UDC 159.964.2-057.875:316.624

[https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-5274-2025-9\(49\)-1155-1168](https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-5274-2025-9(49)-1155-1168)

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## COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING ANXIETY IN STUDENTS IN CONDITIONS OF SOCIAL INSTABILITY

**Abstract.** Contemporary socio-economic and political transformations in Ukraine are accompanied by growing uncertainty and instability, which directly affects the psychological state of the younger generation. A particularly vulnerable group is young students, for whom the years of higher education coincide with a critical stage of personality formation, professional identity development, and socialization. One of the most common psychological phenomena of this period is social anxiety, which manifests itself through fear of negative criticism, avoidance of socially significant situations, decreased self-esteem, and deterioration of interpersonal relationships. Increased anxiety significantly complicates learning activities, adaptation to new conditions, and integration into social life, which necessitates the search for effective psychological tactics to overcome it.

Given the social instability caused by war, economic difficulties, and uncertainty about the future, it is important to use cognitive-behavioral strategies, which have proven to be the most scientifically sound and effective approach to treating anxiety disorders.

The main mechanisms for relieving anxiety within cognitive-behavioral therapy are cognitive restructuring, exposure techniques, behavioral experiments, desensitization methods, as well as training in relaxation skills and mindfulness practices. Their effectiveness is determined by their complex influence on the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological spheres of an individual's functioning.





The article examines the specifics of psychological, emotional, behavioral, and somatic manifestations of anxiety in students and determines that cognitive-behavioral strategies contribute to reducing destructive beliefs, developing stress resistance skills, the formation of constructive behavior patterns in socially significant situations, and increased self-confidence. The use of these strategies not only reduces the intensity of anxiety symptoms, but also ensures long-term improvement in the social adaptation and psychological well-being of students.

It is concluded that the systematic introduction of cognitive-behavioral methods into the practice of psychological support for students during social instability is a necessary element of modern psychoprophylaxis and psychological assistance. This will contribute to the preservation of the mental health of young people and create the conditions for their successful integration into social and professional life.

**Keywords:** social anxiety, cognitive-behavioral strategies, students, social instability, psychological support.

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## КОГНІТИВНО-ПОВЕДІНКОВІ СТРАТЕГІЇ ПОДОЛАННЯ ТРИВОГИ В СТУДЕНТІВ В УМОВАХ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ НЕСТАБІЛЬНОСТІ

**Анотація.** Сучасні соціально-економічні та політичні трансформації в Україні супроводжуються зростанням рівня невизначеності та нестабільності, що безпосередньо впливає на психологічний стан молодого покоління. Особливо вразливою категорією є студентська молодь, для якої роки навчання у вищій школі збігаються з критичним етапом формування особистості, становлення професійної ідентичності та соціалізації. Одним із найбільш поширених психологічних феноменів цього періоду є соціальна тривожність, яка проявляється через страх негативної критики, уникання соціально значущих ситуацій, зниження самооцінки та погіршення якості міжособистісних взаємин.



Підвищена тривожність суттєво ускладнює навчальну діяльність, адаптацію до нових умов та інтеграцію в суспільне життя, що зумовлює потребу пошуку дієвих психологічних тактик її подолання.

З огляду на соціальну мінливість, спричинену війною, економічними труднощами та непевністю майбутнього, актуальним є застосування когнітивно-поведінкових стратегій, які зарекомендували себе як найбільш науково обґрунтований та результативний напрям у роботі з тривожними розладами. Основними механізмами позбавлення тривоги в межах когнітивно-поведінкової терапії є когнітивна реструктуризація, експозиційні техніки, поведінкові експерименти, методи десенсибілізації, а також тренування навичок релаксації та майндфулнес-практики. Їхня ефективність окреслена комплексним впливом на когнітивну, емоційну, поведінкову та фізіологічну сфери функціонування особистості.

У статті розглянуто специфіку психологічних, емоційних, поведінкових і соматичних проявів тривожності в студентському віці та визначено, що когнітивно-поведінкові стратегії сприяють зменшенню деструктивних переконань, розвитку навичок стресостійкості, формуванню конструктивних моделей поведінки в соціально значущих ситуаціях, а також підвищенню впевненості у власних силах. Використання зазначених стратегій дає змогу не лише знизити інтенсивність тривожних симптомів, але й забезпечити довгострокове покращення соціальної адаптації та психологічного добробуту студентської молоді.

Зроблено висновок, що системне впровадження когнітивно-поведінкових методів у практику психологічного супроводу студентів під час соціальної нестабільності є необхідним елементом сучасної психопрофілактики та психологічної допомоги. Це сприятиме збереженню психічного здоров'я молоді та створить передумови для її успішної інтеграції в суспільне та професійне життя.

**Ключові слова:** соціальна тривожність, когнітивно-поведінкові стратегії, студенти, соціальна нестабільність, психологічна підтримка.

**Introduction.** Contemporary Ukrainian society is undergoing large-scale transformations that encompass the political, economic, social, and cultural-national spheres. These processes have intensified significantly as a result of the full-scale military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The war has created additional conditions that have led not only to profound changes in the functioning of state institutions and socio-economic relations but also to deep psychological transformations within society.

A constant sense of danger, heightened anxiety, and stress have become an integral part of the daily lives of most citizens. The media space, saturated with coverage of military events, intensified information and psychological pressure, and direct experiences of war realities further exacerbate social anxiety among Ukrainians.



Particular attention should be paid to university students, who represent one of the most vulnerable social groups. This generation is developing in an environment of instability and uncertainty, which creates additional risks for socialization, educational activities, and personal development.

For students, the war brings not only physical threats to life and health but also numerous psychological challenges. Among these are increased stress levels, concern for the safety of loved ones, forced separation from family members, displacement, loss of familiar social environments, traumatic experiences, and uncertainty about the future.

In conditions of social volatility, university students are compelled to adapt to new societal realities, develop effective methods of coping with stress, and acquire skills of emotional self-regulation. At the same time, elevated levels of social anxiety negatively affect learning capacity, reduce the effectiveness of interpersonal interactions, and weaken stress resilience. Excessive anxiety among students restricts their ability to respond adequately to challenges, complicates the process of making important decisions, and hinders the construction of long-term life strategies.

The impact of social instability on the psychological state of university students, particularly on the level of social anxiety, is one of the leading issues in contemporary scientific discourse. It requires comprehensive investigation not only within the framework of personality psychology but also in the domains of social psychology and educational practice. Addressing this problem is of fundamental importance for ensuring the quality of professional training of future specialists, as well as for the successful integration of the new generation of Ukrainians into a reconstructed post-war society.

**Literature Review.** In psychological science, anxiety is defined as a multidimensional emotional state characterized by elevated levels of psycho-emotional tension and mobilization of the individual under stress. Studies conducted by Ukrainian scholars, including S. and M. Tomchuk [1], I. Blokhina [2], T. Holovchenko [3], I. Yastochkina [4], Zh. Sydorenko and O. Slobodianiuk [5], as well as A. Revt and O. Karpenko [6], demonstrate that anxiety is closely related both to individual personality traits and to the conditions of the social environment, the degree to which personal needs are met, and the ability to adapt.

In the works of T. Palko and K. Travina [7], particular emphasis is placed on the decisive impact of extreme situations, especially military actions, on the psycho-emotional state of adolescents, which highlights the increased vulnerability of young people to the development of anxiety disorders.

Social anxiety, as shown in the research of N. Starovoitenko [8], O. Biziuk [9], I. Batrachenko, M. Suriakova, and I. Uchytel [10], O. Voloshko [11], O. Ampleieva and A. Pluzhnyk [12], M. Kuznietsov and V. Shapovalova [13], as well as V. Batsylieva and O. Reznichenko [14], has a complex, multidimensional structure. It manifests itself in the specifics of students' interpersonal interactions, the formation of fears, and behavioral patterns in educational and social environments.





The analysis of findings presented in the publications of O. Voitsekhovska and L. Mikheeva [15], as well as L. Zhdaniuk [16], indicates that the social fears of university students intensify under conditions of transformation associated with the shift to distance learning and the realities of war. This underscores the relevance of studying the phenomenon of social anxiety in the current Ukrainian context.

At the same time, the problem of social anxiety among students from the perspective of clinical approaches has been addressed in the works of N. Ahaiev, O. Kokun, I. Pishko, N. Lozinska, and V. Ostapchuk [17], as well as O. Kokun and V. Moroz [18]. These authors analyze the mechanisms underlying the formation of fear and propose methods of its correction in wartime conditions, which is of particular importance for understanding the psycho-emotional state of students experiencing stressful and crisis situations.

Recent studies by Ukrainian scholars demonstrate that anxiety and social fears among university students represent a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interplay of personality traits, social factors, and the impact of extreme circumstances. At the same time, the specific manifestations of social anxiety during wartime remain insufficiently explored, which underlines the relevance of further research and the search for effective strategies of psychological support for students.

The **aim of the article** is to analyze the features and psychological mechanisms of social anxiety among university students in conditions of social instability and to identify effective strategies for its mitigation.

**The objectives of the article are to:**

- characterize theoretical approaches to the study of anxiety and social fears;
- examine the impact of extreme circumstances on the psycho-emotional state of students;
- assess the factors that exacerbate social anxiety;
- develop recommendations for psychological support and the correction of anxiety states among university students in times of crisis.

**Results.** The student age range, spanning from 18 to 25 years, is a critical stage of personal development, as it represents the transition from adolescence to adulthood. According to international classification, the completion of adolescence and the onset of adulthood occur at the age of 20 for women and 21 for men. During this period, worldview formation, professional self-determination, and the development of personal identity take place, processes that are often accompanied by heightened levels of anxiety and the need to establish effective cognitive-behavioral strategies for its management [19, p. 143].

Anxiety is defined as a psychological state manifested through feelings of tension, fear, worry, and uncertainty. Its intensity can range from moderate concern to pronounced anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, and social phobia [20].

Anxiety among university students in conditions of social volatility is caused not only by age-related characteristics but also by external factors such as military conflict,



economic uncertainty, and the risk of losing stability. Under these circumstances, social anxiety emerges as an emotional state characterized by fear of negative evaluation by others and avoidance of social situations. In moderate forms, it may serve an adaptive function; however, when it becomes chronic, it significantly impairs social adaptation, self-esteem, and mental health. One of the most effective approaches to its correction is cognitive-behavioral therapy, which aims to restructure destructive beliefs and develop constructive behavioral patterns [19, p. 143].

Against the backdrop of the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, the impact of stressogenic factors on the psycho-emotional state of university students has intensified considerably. The duration and intensity of the armed conflict, uncertainty about the future, constant security threats, and continuous information pressure lead to chronic psycho-emotional strain, which directly affects the level of anxiety and the overall psychological condition of students.

In their empirical studies, T. Palko and K. Travina emphasize the significant increase in manifestations of anxiety among young people living in areas affected by military conflict. The findings indicate that 45% of adolescents demonstrated a high level of situational anxiety, which is expressed through excessive worry before socially significant events, fear of negative evaluation, and a tendency to catastrophize potential outcomes. At the same time, 50% of respondents exhibited clinically significant symptoms of depression, including depressed mood, apathy, sleep disturbances, and reduced concentration. These results confirm the need for timely psychoprophylactic and psychocorrectional interventions [7, p. 840].

The data obtained suggest that social instability and external stressors significantly complicate students' adaptation processes, negatively affect their academic performance, interpersonal interactions, and overall psychological well-being. This, in turn, substantiates the relevance of applying cognitive-behavioral strategies as one of the most effective approaches to overcoming anxiety during wartime.

S. Tomchuk distinguishes two main groups of anxiety symptoms. The first includes internal somatic signs that arise from the anticipation of danger, while the second consists of external behavioral reactions in response to extreme situations. Internal symptoms of anxiety include rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, sensations of heat or cold in the solar plexus, feelings of clumsiness, weakness in the legs, trembling hands, abdominal pain, excessive sweating of the palms, and itching, among others. Behavioral symptoms of anxiety are manifested in the inability to relax, reduced concentration, loss of trust in others, and avoidance of crisis situations [1, p. 70].

Psychological manifestations of anxiety among students are most often associated with the fear of negative evaluation and a tendency to catastrophize potential outcomes. In such cases, cognitive-behavioral techniques are effective, as they allow the identification of irrational beliefs (for example, assigning exaggerated importance to a single mistake) and their replacement with more realistic judgments, which helps to reduce internal tension [22].



Emotional manifestations, including exam-related worry, feelings of shame, or perceptions of not meeting expectations, can be corrected through cognitive restructuring and desensitization methods. These approaches enable students to perceive failure not as a catastrophe but as a natural stage of learning and personal development [21, p. 151].

In the behavioral domain, the leading strategy is gradual exposure to socially significant situations. Unlike avoidance of contact, which exacerbates anxiety, the cognitive-behavioral approach involves modeling safe social interactions and gradually engaging students in presentations, discussions, and group activities. The use of role-playing exercises and behavioral experiments promotes the reinforcement of new, more adaptive patterns of response [16, p. 30].

Physiological manifestations of anxiety, including rapid heartbeat, excessive sweating, muscle tension, and panic attacks, can be corrected through the training of relaxation skills, breathing exercises, and mindfulness practices. These methods, which are integrated into cognitive-behavioral strategies, are aimed at reducing somatic tension and increasing control over bodily reactions [16, p. 32].

Anxiety has a significant impact on adaptation to a new social environment, academic performance, and the psychological well-being of students. Awareness of these aspects is a necessary condition for the development of psychological support programs that promote harmonious personal growth and successful social integration of young people (Fig. 1) [22, p. 147].

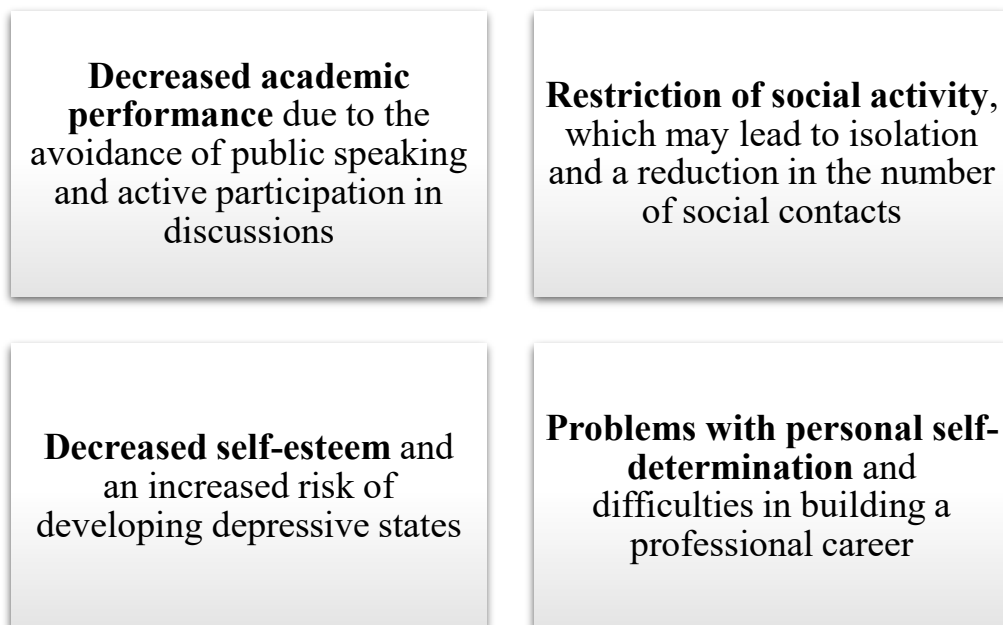


Fig. 1. Consequences of social anxiety among students

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most extensively studied and effective approaches to psychological support in cases of anxiety disorders, including social anxiety. It integrates cognitive and behavioral techniques, helping individuals to



recognize and modify irrational beliefs while gradually developing new coping strategies in stressful situations.

At the student age, which is characterized by a high level of social and academic demands, CBT methods are particularly significant for fostering adaptability and resilience [19, p. 143].

Cognitive restructuring is regarded as one of the core CBT techniques, aimed at identifying and transforming destructive beliefs into more realistic and adaptive ones. The central objective of this method is to recognize irrational thoughts that provoke excessive anxiety and to construct alternative interpretations of situations. Among university students, common patterns include overgeneralization (“if I fail one exam, it means I am incapable of studying”), catastrophizing (“if I make a mistake, everyone will laugh at me”), or polarized thinking (“I am either a perfect student or a complete failure”).

Through the use of cognitive restructuring, such beliefs can be replaced with more rational ones, for example: “a mistake is an experience that helps improve knowledge and skills,” “a single failure does not determine my future achievements,” or “an instructor’s evaluation concerns only a specific task, not my personality as a whole.”

Research demonstrates that systematic work on replacing irrational beliefs contributes to reduced anxiety levels, increased self-confidence, and the development of constructive self-regulation skills [23].

Equally important are exposure techniques, which are based on the principle of gradual immersion in situations that provoke anxiety.

Their effectiveness lies in reducing sensitivity to stress-inducing stimuli through step-by-step contact with them. For students, this may involve a gradual increase in social demands: starting with a brief speech in front of one or two close acquaintances, progressing to a presentation before a small academic group, and eventually delivering a public presentation at a seminar or conference.

An essential condition for the effectiveness of exposure is the controlled nature of the process, since overly abrupt contact with socially significant situations may intensify fear, whereas gradual exposure fosters tolerance to anxiety-inducing stimuli. Moreover, exposure techniques help students gradually abandon avoidance behaviors, which often reinforce anxiety, and acquire experiences of successfully overcoming fears in safe conditions.

Empirical evidence indicates that the systematic use of exposure methods significantly reduces the level of social anxiety and increases confidence in one’s own communicative and academic abilities [24].

Behavioral experiments occupy an important place in the repertoire of cognitive-behavioral strategies, as they allow students to test the realism of their beliefs in direct social contexts [23–26].

Their purpose is to create conditions in which new experiences can be acquired that contradict irrational expectations (Table 1).





Table 1

**Cognitive-behavioral methods of overcoming anxiety  
among students in conditions of social instability**

Method	Goal	Example of student application
Cognitive restructuring	Identifying irrational beliefs and replacing them with more rational ones	The student replaces the thought “if I make a mistake on the exam, it is the end” with “a mistake is part of learning”
Exposure techniques	Gradual reduction of fear through controlled exposure to anxiety-provoking situations	Rehearsing presentations: first in front of a friend, then in front of a group, and later at a seminar
Behavioral experiments	Testing erroneous beliefs in real-life conditions	The student participates in a discussion and realizes that peers do not respond critically
Relaxation techniques and mindfulness	Reducing the physiological manifestations of anxiety and regaining control over bodily reactions	Performing breathing exercises before an exam to lower heart rate and tension
Development of social skills	Building confidence in communication and reducing avoidance behavior	Role-playing exercises to practice assertiveness skills and overcome fear of criticism

*Source: summarized by the authors*

For example, a student who believes that “if I ask the lecturer a question, he will think I am incompetent” may deliberately seek clarification during a lecture. Often, the result is the opposite: the lecturer responds calmly and benevolently, and peers do not display disapproval. In this way, a behavioral experiment allows students to verify in practice that the likelihood of negative consequences is much lower than expected.

For students suffering from social anxiety, the systematic implementation of such trials gradually dismantles false beliefs, reduces anxiety levels, and promotes the development of more adaptive models of interaction with others [25, p. 82].

Relaxation techniques and mindfulness methods are aimed at reducing the intensity of the physiological manifestations of anxiety, which are often among its most noticeable and distressing components. For students experiencing symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, or shortness of breath during socially significant events, relaxation practices can serve as an effective tool for self-regulation. The most common techniques include breathing exercises involving slow and conscious breathing; progressive muscle relaxation, which consists of tensing and subsequently relaxing specific muscle groups; and meditative practices focused on attention to the present moment.



Regular use of these methods helps lower the baseline level of physiological tension, which in turn reduces the intensity of anxiety responses in critical situations. Research indicates that mindfulness practices integrated into students' daily lives not only decrease manifestations of anxiety but also improve concentration, academic performance, and overall psychological well-being [26].

The development of social skills is regarded as one of the leading areas of cognitive-behavioral therapy aimed at overcoming social anxiety among university students. The primary goal of this approach is to foster confidence in interpersonal interactions and enhance the ability to engage in effective social communication. Social anxiety is often accompanied by avoidance of communication, fear of public speaking, and difficulties in establishing new contacts, all of which negatively affect both academic performance and interpersonal relationships.

Within the framework of social skills development, students participate in specially organized training sessions that focus on practicing specific communicative competencies. These include learning active listening techniques, developing self-presentation strategies, improving the ability to articulate one's position convincingly, and building confidence in responding during seminars and public discussions. An equally important component is the acquisition of assertiveness skills, which involve expressing one's needs and feelings without aggression but also without passive compliance.

Such sessions provide a safe environment for practice, allowing students to gradually overcome fears and gain positive experiences of social interaction [22, p. 148]. Of particular importance is the group format, where students can rehearse new behavioral models in interaction with their peers. This form of activity helps to overcome feelings of isolation, creates a supportive environment, and increases motivation for personal change. As a result, students gain greater self-confidence, experience reduced levels of social anxiety, and improve both academic and interpersonal adaptation.

**Conclusions.** The study provides grounds to affirm that cognitive-behavioral strategies are an effective tool for overcoming anxiety among university students, particularly in conditions of social instability caused by war and societal crises. The key components of this approach include cognitive restructuring, exposure techniques, behavioral experiments, relaxation practices, and the development of social skills. Their integrated application influences all levels of anxiety manifestation: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological.

The use of cognitive restructuring helps students cope with irrational beliefs and develop more rational thinking. Exposure techniques and behavioral experiments enable students to gradually reduce avoidance behaviors, test their own beliefs in practice, and gain positive experiences of social interaction. Relaxation practices and mindfulness techniques decrease the intensity of physiological manifestations of anxiety, while the development of social skills fosters confidence in interpersonal communication and promotes more successful socialization. The comprehensive



application of these strategies creates conditions for enhancing the psychological resilience of students, improving their adaptation to the challenges of modern society, reducing the risks of social isolation, and increasing academic performance. In a broader perspective, the cognitive-behavioral approach can serve as a foundation for developing psychological support programs for students in crisis situations, which represents an important task of contemporary educational and social policy in Ukraine.

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