

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHIC ILLNESS: THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PREVENTION, GUIDANCE AND CARE FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THEIR STUDENTS

SAÚDE MENTAL E ADOECIMENTO PSÍQUICO: O PAPEL DAS INSTITUIÇÕES DE ENSINO SUPERIOR FRENTE À PREVENÇÃO, ORIENTAÇÃO E CUIDADOS COM A SAÚDE MENTAL DE SEUS DISCENTES

SALUD MENTAL Y ENFERMEDAD PSÍQUICO: EL PAPEL DE LAS INSTITUCIONES DE EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR EN LA PREVENCIÓN, ORIENTACIÓN Y CUIDADO DE LA SALUD MENTAL DE SUS ESTUDIANTES



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ABSTRACT: This research aims to understand the role of HEI managers in promoting mental health care for their students. To develop this article, the bibliographical approach method was used. Bibliographical research seeks to solve a problem, through the investigation of published theoretical references, which makes it possible to collect information to analyze and discuss the various scientific contributions regarding the researched object. College students are facing an increasing number of challenges in their personal and academic lives, and many are dealing with mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and stress. In this sense, the role of Institutions in caring for students' mental health is fundamental to ensuring that students have access to quality services and can have good academic and personal performance..

KEYWORDS: Common Mental Disorder. University education. University Management. Students. Mental health.

RESUMO: *Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo compreender o papel dos gestores de IES frente à promoção de cuidados com a saúde mental de seus discentes. Para o desenvolvimento deste artigo foi utilizado o método de abordagem bibliográfica. A pesquisa bibliográfica busca a solução de um problema, mediante a investigação de referenciais teóricos publicados, o que possibilita o levantamento de informações para analisar e discutir as diversas contribuições científicas acerca do objeto pesquisado. Os estudantes universitários estão enfrentando um número crescente de desafios em suas vidas pessoais e acadêmicas, e muitos estão lidando com transtornos mentais como ansiedade, depressão e estresse. Nesse sentido, o papel das Instituições frente aos cuidados da saúde mental dos discentes é fundamental para garantir que os estudantes tenham acesso a serviços de qualidade e possam ter um bom desempenho acadêmico e pessoal.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Transtorno Mental Comum. Ensino Superior. Gestão Universitária. Discentes. Saúde mental.*

RESUMEN: *Esta investigación tiene como objetivo comprender el papel de los directivos de las IES en la promoción de la atención de la salud mental de sus estudiantes. Para desarrollar este artículo se utilizó el método de enfoque bibliográfico. La investigación bibliográfica busca resolver un problema, a través de la investigación de referencias teóricas publicadas, que posibilite recolectar información para analizar y discutir los diversos aportes científicos respecto del objeto investigado. Los estudiantes universitarios enfrentan un número cada vez mayor de desafíos en su vida personal y académica, y muchos enfrentan trastornos de salud mental como ansiedad, depresión y estrés. En este sentido, el papel de las Instituciones en el cuidado de la salud mental de los estudiantes es fundamental para garantizar que los estudiantes tengan acceso a servicios de calidad y puedan tener un buen desempeño académico y personal.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Trastorno Mental Común. Enseñanza superior. Gestión Universitaria. Estudiantes. Salud mental.*

Introction

According to Law n. 9394/1996, known as the Brazilian Education Guidelines and Bases Law (Brasil, 1996), higher education must be offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which can be "public or private, with varying degrees of scope or specialization" (Art. 45). In the same vein, Decree n. 9235/2017 (Brasil, 2017) establishes that HEIs, depending on their academic prerogatives, such as the existence of postgraduate courses and administrative organization, can be classified as colleges, university centers or universities.

Teixeira (1968; 1998) adopts the view that education should drive human emancipation, providing a democratic and peaceful revolution, which begins by guaranteeing universal access to basic and higher education. From this perspective, HEIs take on a political and integrating character, far beyond technical vocational training, although this has been a hallmark of higher education, especially since the French Revolution and, in Brazil, since the industrialization process that took place in the mid-20th century (Almeida Filho, 2016).

Based on an analysis of the history of higher education, including in the Brazilian context, Almeida Filho (2016) argues that Brazilian HEIs are experiencing two trends: privatization and internationalization, marked by an understanding of higher education as a market product which, as such, submits "the university *ethos*, academic ethics, research integrity and educational values to mercantilist processes" (p. 25, our translation).

Thus, HEIs are moving away from political, comprehensive and interdisciplinary formation, in which the central principle is to develop personal and professional skills and competencies in students, preparing them to act in and with the diverse communities and socio-cultural issues of their time, as well as providing cognitive improvement for their students, constituting an environment that provides positive impacts (Bardagi, 2007).

In addition, entering higher education is accompanied by processes of transitions and adaptations to academic teaching, situations that require the psychosocial development of adolescents or young adults, which can make students feel vulnerable (Bargadi, 2007).

Given this scenario, students are more likely to develop a mental disorder, such as anxiety, depression and stress (Almeida, 2002). In this direction, the literature points to a prevalence of 15 to 25% of university students who will present some mental disorder during their formative years (Vasconcelos *et al.*, 2015).

Entering university mobilizes the individual's psychosocial and emotional repertoire, as the academic environment provides students with new experiences that affect both them and their environment (Vaz; Vaz, 2019). This new stage is accompanied by various stressors, such

as the need to feel accepted by a group, concerns about their professional career, the formation of their identity, distancing from family members and uncertainties about the future. Often, the doubt about their potential to deal with these events ends up causing them suffering (Vaz; Vaz, 2019).

It is therefore important to note that higher education institutions act as mediators of students' relationships with the world, offering diverse models of thought, meanings and values, which often clash with students' values and previous knowledge. However, institutions have limitations in offering security and balance in the development and regulation of personality. At this point, for example, academic literature reports some challenges, such as the existence of asymmetrical power relations between teachers and students, intensive study hours, excessive demands and worries about the future career (Bohry, 2007).

In addition, common mental disorders are the most prevalent in the world population (Prince *et al.*, 2007) and are also known as minor psychiatric disorders or non-psychotic mental disorders, which were initially characterized as the sum of symptoms, signs and emotions, including insomnia, physical discomfort, fatigue, sadness, nervousness, irritability, stress, anxiety, feelings of uselessness, forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating (Ghosh, 2006). The suffering caused by the extensive symptomatology leads the individual to maladaptive functioning, with damage to their quality of life and functional capacity (Murcho *et al.*, 2016).

Currently, the occurrence of people with a common mental disorder (CMD) has been reported in the literature. The global figures for 2030 include these disorders among the most disabling for individuals (Prince *et al.*, 2007). In Brazil, around 86% of the population suffers from some form of mental disorder, be it depression, anxiety, stress or other (Organização Mundial da Saúde, 2022).

Depression is understood to be a chronic illness that requires regular monitoring, and treatment can take years or last a lifetime (Angélico, 2021). This disorder is caused by chemical changes in the brain, with a decrease or lack of production of neurotransmitters such as serotonin, noradrenaline and dopamine (Gorwood, 2018).

Depression can be caused by a combination of social, psychological, biological and hereditary factors. This disorder can affect various aspects of the individual's daily life, such as changes in sleep and eating habits, social distancing, isolation, absenteeism from work and studies (Organização Mundial da Saúde, 2022).

Linked to these aspects, depression is associated with symptoms of depressed mood, loss of interest and pleasure, reduced energy, increased fatigue and reduced attention,

concentration, self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as developing pessimistic ideas about the future (Baptista; Oliveira, 2009). In the most tragic of cases, depression can lead to suicide. Every year, around 800,000 people die by suicide (Organização Pan-Americana de Saúde - OPAS, 2020).

There are several studies involved in the origin of anxiety, such as interactions between neurobiological, psychosocial, environmental factors and genetic predisposition, for example: a history of first-degree relatives with psychiatric illnesses, trauma, stress, comorbidity, among others (Lopes *et al.*, 2021).

The 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) describes eleven types of anxiety disorders, the most common of which is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). In Brazil, the prevalence of people with anxiety is 9.3% of the population, making it the most anxious country in the world (WHO, 2017).

GAD is characterized by excessive worry and apprehension about various aspects of daily life (Who, 2021). Individuals affected by this disorder have "feelings of nervousness, tension or panic, in reaction to various situations; frequent concern about the negative effects of the past and possibilities of negative experiences in the future; feeling fearful and apprehensive about the uncertain waiting for the worst to happen" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 779, our translation).

Another factor that interferes with the natural evolution of the disorder is the individual's negligence, since they do not seek medical help from a specialized professional, which aggravates the clinical symptoms and increases their intensity (Cintra *et al.*, 2020).

It is important to note that these symptoms are variable, and each individual can trigger specific symptoms, thus making the definition of the diagnosis complex (Costa *et al.*, 2020). One of the aspects that is assessed is the recurrent manifestation of symptoms for at least six months (WHO, 2021).

Stress is understood as a psychological or physiological reaction that causes changes in physical and emotional behavior. They are stimuli in stages of progression that occur as a reaction to unpleasant situations, whether external, internal or unexpected (Preto *et al.*, 2018).

In this context, stress encompasses cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors, which, in the long term, can influence other dimensions, aggravating the areas that are already being implicated, resulting in different degrees of morbidity (Beneton *et al.*, 2021). In addition, the relationship between the neuroendocrine and immune systems is evident, and in this sense, there are several influences of stress on inflammatory processes, which predispose to chronic

diseases, including those of morbidity and mortality, such as cardiovascular diseases, which have an impact on the other organic systems of the human being (Antunes, 2019).

Therefore, this research aims to understand the role of HEI managers in promoting mental health care for their students, considering the importance of actions to promote and intervene in the mental health of students in higher education institutions, as well as the impact of university experiences on health/mental illness.

Methodology

To develop this article, we used a qualitative approach with a literature review.

The qualitative method is applied to the study of history, relationships, representations, beliefs, perceptions and opinions, products of the interpretations that humans make about how they live, build their artifacts and themselves, feel and think (Minayo, 2014, p. 57, our translation).

Bibliographical research seeks to solve a problem by investigating published theoretical references, which makes it possible to gather information in order to analyze and discuss the various scientific contributions to the researched object (Bocato, 2006).

The searches for scientific productions were carried out in the main article indexing databases (Parker *et al.*, 2014), such as: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO); Science & Health Magazine, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Virtual Health Library (VHL). These searches were carried out using a combination of the descriptors "Common Mental Disorder" (*Transtorno Mental Comum*); "Mental Health" (*Saúde Mental*); "Managers" (*Gestores*), "Prevalence of CMD in students" (*revalência de TMC em discentes*) and "Higher Education Institution" (*Instituição de Ensino Superior*).

Data collection in this research followed strict criteria, which guarantee the quality and relevance of the results. As a criterion for including the writings, those that met the objective of this article were selected.

During the searches on the indexing platforms, a total of 32,400 articles relating to mental health were found, with the delimitations of the search words when searching for Common Mental Disorder 16,700 articles were found, still in the searches when searching for the words combined as Mental Health of Students 14,400 studies were found, when searching for Prevalence of Mental Disorder in students 6,250 articles were found. Following the inclusion criteria of this research, 26 articles were selected for the development of the results.

In addition, the justification for collecting the data is also based on the addition of research on the subject, thus highlighting its social contribution.

To analyze the data, we used the qualitative method, which allowed us to identify and develop empirical categories. Initially, the analysis followed an inductive approach, in which detailed readings were made of the materials collected, looking for relevant patterns, themes and concepts.

Once the categories had emerged, an interactive coding criterion was adopted, after which the categories were identified and grouped together. This method allowed for a better understanding and contextualization of the phenomena studied.

In order to contextualize these categories in the scientific field over time, a systemic review of the selected readings was carried out. This review made it possible to trace the evolution of the empirical categories within the academic context.

The temporal delimitation was based on the concepts pertinent to Common Mental Disorders (2002), and other approaches relating to Anxiety, Depression and Stress Disorders were pointed out in a temporal range with advances up to the year 2022, as highlighted by the author Emanuéli Beneton *et al.* (2021) and by the World Health Organization (2022).

During the course of this article, the research progressed along a timeline that began in 2008 and ended in mid-2022, permeated by a survey of studies pertaining to the mental health of university students. The literary approach sought this dimension in a global scenario, guided by the recurring increase in Common Mental Disorders in this population.

Results and discussion

Prevalence of common mental disorders in students at higher education institutions

Recent research indicates an alarming scenario regarding the investigation of intense psychological suffering in the world's young population (Who, 2016). The prevalence of Common Mental Disorders (CMD) stands out (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022), making it a public health problem (Oliveira *et al.*, 2020).

Data indicate an increase in Common Mental Disorders among university students (Fórum Nacional de Pró-Reitores de Assuntos Comunitários e Estudantis, 2018). The transition to higher education is a moment that coincides with a critical phase for young people, characterized by individualization and distance from family and friends, integration into new

social groups and the development of responsibility and autonomy (Patton *et al.*, 2016), in addition to cognitive, affective and personal changes (Castro, 2017).

Higher education is understood as a challenging time in student life, considering the need to adapt to the pace of studies, methodologies and the need for autonomy (Zbuinovicz; Mariotti, 2021). As well as the requirement for students to attend to multiple and complex tasks (Padovani *et al.*, 2014).

In HEIs, it is possible to observe circumstances that trigger psychological distress in students and professionals. Similarly, it is possible to witness manifestations of symptoms such as depression, isolation, phobias, drug addiction and absenteeism (Xavier *et al.*, 2008).

In a sample of 424,128 university students from 65 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), around 83.5% of students reported having been affected by some emotional problem in the last year, with 63.6% reporting feelings of anxiety and 45.6% of those interviewed feeling discouraged to carry out their activities (Fórum Nacional de Pró-Reitores de Assuntos Comunitários Estudantis, 2018). In view of this, HEIs should be concerned about students' mental health (Cerchiari *et al.*, 2005).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of the mental health of university students began to gain prominence in research, with the aim of identifying the health impacts of social isolation and physical distancing on students' health (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022). For example, a survey of 500 university students at a public institution in Brazil found that 89% were distressed and 91.7% were worried about the pandemic (Martins *et al.*, 2020).

In the same vein, a study carried out in the United States examined the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of university students, showing a significant increase in symptoms such as depression, anxiety, substance use and suicidal ideation. 5,470 students were interviewed, which found that 40.9% of participants have at least some form of mental illness. Symptoms of anxiety and depression accounted for 30.9%; symptoms related to trauma and stress resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic accounted for 26.3%; 13.3% of individuals said they increased their use of chemical substances due to the emotions caused by the pandemic scenario. And when asked about suicidal ideation, 10.7% of respondents said they had wanted to kill themselves in the last 30 days (Czeisler *et al.*, 2020).

A survey was carried out with 476 university students in a large urban center in the Northeast of Brazil on the prevalence and factors of depression and anxiety. The study found that among students with some level of depression, the following stood out: 75.8% had a mild

level. As regards the results for anxiety, 62.2% of the students had a mild level, 27.9% and 9.9% had a moderate and severe level, respectively.

Similarly, the authors of the article "*Saúde mental de estudantes franceses durante a pandemia de Covid-19*" (Mental health of French students during the Covid-19 pandemic) conducted a study of 8,004 university students in order to assess the effects of the pandemic on students' mental health and identify the main risk factors. The results showed that levels of anxiety and depression increased significantly during the pandemic, especially among women and those who reported having been infected with the virus. At the time of the survey, the results showed that 43% of students suffered from depression (6.96% severe), 39.19% suffered from anxiety (20.7% severe) and 42.94% from distress (16.09% severe) (Essadek; Rabeyron, 2020).

Another study published in the Journal of Affective Disorders in 2021 examined the prevalence of anxiety and depression disorders among Chinese university students during the pandemic. The results showed that the prevalence of anxiety and depression disorders increased significantly during the pandemic compared to previous studies. Among the 68,685 (26.3%) had symptoms of depression and 14.7% symptoms of anxiety (Lei *et al.*, 2019).

These and other studies indicate that common mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and stress are prevalent in university students. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened these problems worldwide (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, the high incidence of Common Mental Disorders highlights the urgent need to implement programs to prevent psychological distress aimed at the specific demands of academics (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022).

The volunteer project called Escuta Solidária (Solidarity Listening), which was carried out with undergraduate and postgraduate university students from May to June 2020, promoted psychological consultations, which took place online. This study emphasized that "the university environment can and should be configured as a place for mental health care in its different possibilities, and the format proposed in this project is one of them, connecting directly to the current demand in the face of the pandemic" (Correia *et al.*, 2023, p. 4, our translation).

Managers and student mental health care

The Higher Education Institution is part of a system that is recognized for its social actions, whose responsibility is the construction and propagation of knowledge and new knowledge based on principles disseminated to society (Bastos, 2008). Faced with the psychological suffering of students, it is possible to question how far the responsibility of

universities goes, given that the competencies they develop do not cover the therapeutic profile, but the knowledge development profile, in citizen and professional formation. On the other hand, in addition to professional education, universities are also responsible for building socio-emotional, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that have a direct impact on professional practice and the exercise of citizenship (Bergamaschi, 2019).

In any case, it can be seen that universities are environments where the symptoms of students' psychological distress are present, and the experience in this environment is pointed out as a relevant variable in the emergence or care of psychological illness. Thus, these institutions have a responsibility to promote university mental health, given their commitment to society (Bergamaschi, 2019).

That said, it is possible to state that universities have a duty to promote actions that meet the guidelines, prevention and care regarding the mental health of students, impacting on the student's ability to cope with stress and daily demands, preserving positive emotions, satisfaction with life, and personal meaning and purpose. In this conception, it is understood that promoting and guiding mental health is an important component of well-being and should be valued as much as the absence of mental illness (Keys, 2020).

Similarly, in the field of public health, it is understood that primary prevention in mental health consists of actions that seek to prevent the onset of specific disorders (Albee, 1982). Prevention, on the other hand, means anticipating the resolution of a risk situation, and is a determining condition for the factors that trigger illnesses, as well as being inherent to therapeutic processes (Minayo; Souza, 1999).

Thus, the need for mental health care in the promotion, prevention and treatment of mental disorders is emphasized by the need to identify and modify negative or dysfunctional thought patterns that can trigger or worsen emotional problems (Beck, 2020), and the university can function as an important anchor or device for promoting mental health.

It is assumed here that "caring for mental health is more than treating the disease, it is promoting quality of life" (Cury, 2017, p. 23, our translation). In this way, emotional education and self-knowledge are strategies that help prevent mental disorders and promote emotional well-being. In addition, caring for the mind not only for the individual, but also for society as a whole, is fundamental, since emotionally balanced people are more likely to engage in positive and constructive behaviors (Cury, 2017).

The World Health Organization (WHO) released a report on 17 June 2022 that highlights the urgency of transforming mental health and care. The agency invites all

stakeholders, professionals, academics, government, civil society and others to deepen the value of and commitment to mental health, as well as reshape the environments that influence it (Organização Mundial da Saúde, 2022).

In order to address the issue of mental health among students, it is necessary for educational institutions to offer accessible and confidential mental health services, including counseling and psychological support. It is important that students are taught about mental health and that they learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental disorders (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2013).

Higher education institutions should promote actions to raise awareness of self-care and, consequently, mental health, with the aim of contributing to the development and improvement of professionals who are more aware and careful with their own mental health (Stallman, 2010).

Thus, higher education institutions must implement policies that favor and promote the mental health of students, such as: access for students to mental health services, such as therapy; offering mental health promotion programs; training teachers and other HEI employees to recognize signs of mental health problems, as well as being aware of the attitudes to be taken (Lipson; Lipson, 2014).

In addition, it is essential to develop a multidisciplinary support network culture; awareness campaigns to reduce stigma in relation to mental health problems; create spaces for socializing and mutual support; provide resources and information on mental health in common areas of the institution, such as classrooms, libraries and living spaces (Lipson; Lipson, 2014).

The prevalence rates of psychological distress in university students vary somewhat according to the country and sociocultural contexts (Eskin, 2016). It is therefore essential that interventions are developed to prevent this suffering. To this end, it is necessary for all those involved in the higher education environment, parents, students and staff, to understand the dimensions that permeate the student during their academic career.

Final considerations

University students are facing an increasing number of challenges in their personal and academic lives, and many are dealing with significant mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and stress. Therefore, HEIs must recognize the importance of students' mental health and support them, preferably with referrals from public health networks. This not only helps

students to stay healthy and productive, but also contributes to creating an inclusive and welcoming learning environment.

The role of HEIs in caring for students' mental health is fundamental to ensuring that students have access to quality services and can perform well academically and personally. As such, there must be a commitment to creating a healthy and safe environment in which students can feel supported and welcomed.

In addition, students' demands must be heard and effective communication channels created so that they can express themselves and be heard. Actions such as the creation of listening groups, organizational climate surveys and the inclusion of mental health issues in teaching plans and curricular pedagogical proposals are examples of measures that help in decision-making.

In short, in order to meet the objective of this research, it was possible to understand the role of HEIs in preventing, guiding and caring for the mental health of students, based mainly on common mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and stress. Therefore, it is necessary to create a healthy and welcoming environment, promoting awareness-raising actions and combating stigma, with attention to students' demands.

Furthermore, there is a clear need for future research on the subject. It is therefore suggested that the public to be evaluated be expanded, so that the research reaches university managers and teachers.

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