

## Mental health of university students: a social and psychological view

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**Abstract:** Introduction: Mental health problems among Brazilian university students represent a critical public health situation, especially with regard to stress and anxiety. For many, the experience of entering a higher education institution is a determining factor in their psycho-emotional and social development, affecting their entire routine and causing stress and an emotional burden that is difficult to bear, especially after the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. , as noted by Maia and Dias (2020). Objective: Identify factors that affect the mental health of university students through a social and psychological perspective. Methodology: The methodology adopted for this work is based on bibliographic research of scientific articles and periodicals. Results and discussions: According to a study by Fernandes *et al.* (2018), it was observed that 63% of young people at a Public University developed anxiety and there are several factors that negatively influence the mental health of these students, such as social pressure and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, work, linked to the overload of academic life and the new responsibilities it brings, is one of the potential sources of stress and mental disorders (Moretti and Hübner, 2017). Fernandes *et al.* (2018) carried out a survey with 579 students and were able to conclude that 86% of those interviewed had depressive symptoms correlated to social indicators. Moretti and Hubner (2017) conducted their research and came to the conclusion that the education system overburdens higher education students. All the articles reviewed make it clear that the demand for a social standard to be followed and the daily overload make human beings ill. Final considerations: Considering that stress and anxiety represent significant challenges for university students, special attention to this issue is extremely important. The transition to higher education is a crucial moment for the psycho-emotional and social development of young people, worsened by the impact of the pandemic. Studies show that high levels of anxiety affect the majority of these students. Social pressure, difficulties in interpersonal relationships and the accumulation of academic and professional responsibilities are factors that contribute to this challenging scenario. Therefore, it is crucial to address these mental health issues among college students to promote a healthier environment and support the psychological well-being of this population.

**Keywords:** Higher education. Mental health. Stress. Anxiety. Social factors.

## 1. Introduction

In the last decade, a lot has been said about mental health - at school, in the family, in the workplace, among others - however, there is a gap in the discourse on the mental health of university students. This is because the role of the young adult is attributed with an overload of responsibilities in which they feel coerced to solve all the problems that encompass these environments.

Notoriously, the analysis that gives rise to this study starts from the observation of indices, which are increasingly alarming about the impasses experienced by university students and their relationship with psychic instances, namely, disorders such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorders. (OCD) in order to establish connections with the social environment in which individuals are inserted, giving greater focus to the stress and anxiety experienced by them, and, finally, reflecting on actions to mitigate a situation that can be considered serious, however, it does not receive due attention.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1995), health is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not just the absence of disease", however it is possible to see that the ideal state of health, mainly related to the mental aspect and proposed by this declaration, is far from the reality of Brazilians, since Brazil is at the top of the list of the most anxious countries in the world (WHO, 2017). One of the environments where this finding is most evident is at universities, considering that the entry of young people into adulthood and higher education institutions brings decisive changes with regard to the risks of developing disorders (Fernandes *et al.* ).

In this regard, the university is characterized as a context of diverse social interactions, enabling an expansion in skills and competencies, both interpersonal and academic. However, such demands can increase the likelihood of becoming aggravating agents for mental health problems, triggering disorders such as depression or anxiety (Pachane, 2003).

This period is seen as a time of transition, change and adaptation to the student's new routine, with an increase in study hours, exams, work, few hours of sleep, leaving the parents' house and new social-relational challenges. Consequently, these demands require the subject to adapt to this reality, despite the challenges and stress generated (Arino & Bardagi, 2018).

Following this logic, according to Moretti and Hübner (2017), there is an inability to deal well with the frustrations and responsibilities arising from this phase of life. Students' tiring routine also triggers stress that, if not controlled, can lead to serious mental health problems. According to the authors, higher education assigns a range of activities to these students, disregarding the psychological impacts on them, who

need to reconcile academic, social, professional and interpersonal lives. Therefore, they suggest that the education system must be reformulated to mitigate stressful and illness-inducing situations in students' lives.

With regard to these factors, studies carried out by Maltoni and collaborators in 2019 indicate that academics are vulnerable to the development of some mental disorders, such as depression. In this sense, taking into account the transition between high school and university, the following stand out: the pressure of passing the entrance exam, the impact of entering a new student structure, a new teaching methodology, in addition to the occurrence of concrete changes in the routine of life and, sometimes, the city (Pachane, 2003).

Considering other factors that can hinder this academic process and, consequently, the mental health of university students, a growing number of mothers in higher education have been noticed. According to the 2020 Higher Education Census, women represent 55.6% of admissions to in-person undergraduate courses. Furthermore, of the total number of people who complete higher education, more than half are women, reaching 59% (INEP - Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2020). It turns out that many of these women were already or became mothers during their time at university. However, even if, due to society's values, they find themselves in the role of motherhood, these university mothers are expected to maintain a performance equivalent to that of other students (Bentes *et al.*, 2020 ).

How many women are we talking about when we talk about college moms? The data is not consistent (Urpia & Sampaio, 2011), as often not even the educational institutions themselves include information on the number of children and/or their age.

The dynamics of university studies generally require a lot of dedication and attention for good training (Brito *et al.*, 2021). In this situation, an archetype of university student is constructed, based especially on a model of a young student, on a linear path of development, whose family responsibilities (having children and/or marriage) would follow the diploma (Brito *et al.* , 2021 ; Guilhard, 2021; Urpia & Sampaio, 2011).

From this point of view, student life for college mothers can be much more complicated than for most students (Bentes *et al.* , 2020). When there are difficulties in adapting, there is an increased probability of the emergence of physical and psychological symptoms (Lameu, Salazar & Souza, 2016; Silva, Geralda & Heleno, 2012; Vieira *et al.*, 2019).

The little existing national literature on the dual role of being a mother and a university student indicates that these women have great difficulties in carrying out both activities simultaneously, as well as feeling dissatisfied with the results obtained; therefore, due to role overload, they find themselves obliged to make choices and define priorities, hindering performance in one of the roles (Bentes *et al.* , 2020;

Henriques, 2016; Lídia, 2020; Soares *et al.*, 2013 ; Uripa & Sampaio, 2011, Vieira *et al.*, 2019).

In Brazil, in 1958, Loreto carried out the first study on mental health in university students. It identified that approximately one third of the students treated at the Mental Hygiene Service for Students at the Federal University of Pernambuco, in 1956, presented neurotic symptoms, and two thirds, presented personality difficulties and inadequate patterns of emotional reactions. No cases of psychosis were described and the complaints were more related to personal life than academic life, despite students recognizing that emotional difficulties harmed their performance in studies (Loreto, 1958; Giglio, 1976). In work, a decade and a half later, Loreto (1972) identified cases with psychiatric symptoms and cases without a defined psychiatric condition. The latter (60% of the sample) presented “various emotional difficulties” related to the phase of establishing “identity” (Loreto, 1972; Giglio, 1976).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the speed with which traditional teaching transitioned to distance learning, linked to the social isolation promoted by this fact, aggravated the levels of psychological suffering of the university population. Interrupted research projects, uncertainty regarding the future, feelings of loneliness and fear of the disease were some of the effects brought about by the pandemic (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, according to Maia and Dias (2020), the information released during this period, when compared to other pandemics, took on a greater proportion due to the growing digital era of recent decades and the ease of disseminating content, enhancing the feeling of anguish experienced by the population, especially university students.

Based on everything that has been presented, this article seeks not only to understand the psychological instances arising from the range of responsibilities attributed to this population group, but also to understand which social factors contribute to the growth in the rate of disorders among university students, be it social public or private.

## 2. Objectives

Therefore, it is necessary to seek to identify the factors that affect the mental health of university students through a social and psychological perspective, after all, this proposal aims to discuss and question the current context that studies on mental health in higher education help us to occupy. With this, some questions and curiosities about the subject will be brought to light here, as it is a highly necessary topic that has a significant influence on the scientific environment, and with this, it will be clear how higher education students are affected, in a social and psychological perspective.

## 3. Methodology

Considering the relevance of the study presented here for understanding the mental health of higher education students, it is essential to analyze the historical-social

panorama, and for this, such theories will be based on the productions and research of Moretti and Hubner (2017) and Fernandes *et al.* (2018). Therefore, through bibliographical research, scientific articles and periodicals, we seek to understand how individual and subjective emotions are affected by the social environment, which can significantly worsen the mental health of the university population.

This article is based on a descriptive-qualitative scientific methodology, as it seeks to use the approach that studies the subjective aspects of social phenomena and human behavior, in order to understand, to a greater degree, the psychic causes.

## 4. Results and Discussion

In order to understand and analyze the extent of the impacts caused by the academic routine on the lives of university students, Moretti and Hubner (2017) decided to explore situations that generate and/or maintain stress in their research. Therefore, it was possible to observe a test being carried out, which was divided into two phases, where, in the first, the objective was to discover the stress levels of students linked to relaxing moments before, as will be analyzed below.

Regarding the students who participated in this phase of the research, 84.2% were female, with an average age of 22 years; Moretti and Hubner (2017) reached the following conclusions: 5.9% were in a state of constant alert, 45.5% were in a state of resistance, 26.7% were in a state of almost exhaustion, while 22.7% were already they were in a state of exhaustion; After 17 hours of relaxing practices, their stress levels dropped.

From this, 102 participants were used for the second phase of the test, where a questionnaire was administered to 82 students, with the aim of identifying how the academic routine interferes with their stress levels. From the aforementioned reference, it appears that the academic routine - as it has been developed in the last decade - has a negative influence on the stress of undergraduates, to the point where the frequency of tests and assignments end up being contributing factors to a decline in academic performance. mental health. Linked to this, the lack of time appears to exacerbate this problem, considering that 27.3% reported dissatisfaction with the quantity of subjects, 10.9% see self-billing as an aggravating factor, while the others cited internships mandatory requirements, disorganization of the institution and outdated methodology as stressors.

Among the same 82 participants, 82.9% stated that there were stressful factors parallel to teaching, namely: employment with 39.7%, family with 22%, traffic with 13.2%, and the minority reported self-demand, family distance, financial problems and problems in romantic relationships, in addition to the lack of time for leisure as other potential factors.

Regarding the current teaching model, the most prominent results reported it as severe (42.6%), rewarding (31.6%), good (30.5%) and exciting (25.6%), fair/ motivating (19.5%), frustrating (14.6%), punitive (10.9%), bad (4.8%), other adjectives were suggested by research participants such

as: tiring, uneven, disorganized, demanding, worrying, outdated, demotivating, overloaded, among many others.

However, through a more recent study mediated by Fernandes *et al.* (2018) through a sample of 205 university students, research began with the aim of understanding the correlation between social indicators and depressive symptoms in higher education students in Brazil. Using the Socio-Demographic and Occupational Questionnaire methods, the identity of the interviewees remains confidential, but it appears that the majority of participants were single women and with a contribution of 55.3% due to being on the Nursing course (mostly carried out by women to this day).

Considering the extensive routines and responsibilities of university students, it is clear that those who seek to do extra activities cover an amount of 63.9% of development beyond basic activities, adding extracurricular activities, highlighting extension (23.9%), monitoring (10.2%), scientific initiation (7.8%) and internship (5.9%), with an average duration of 12.9 and a maximum of 40 hours per week.

Among those who did some work or were employed (13.2%), the weekly workload had an average of 18.6, with a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 40 hours, according to data collected in the research by Fernandes *et al.* (2018). Considering the global score, the average obtained by the university students was 10.1 ( $\pm 7.7$ ) points, with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 42, for the level of depression symptoms. Given the fact that the majority of graduating students are female, consequently the data mentioned also includes young adult women as the leading audience.

In the context of students in general, as the data were presented, a greater gradient in relation to students with anxiety was highlighted in relation to students with depression. Being part of the excessive routine and occupations generated by it is one of the factors that make depression at more severe levels impossible. The aggravating factor occurs in 30.2% of cases of depression among university students, an average amount compared to the 30.06% of cases of depression outside the academic field, according to Fernandes *et al.* (2018), but which represents less than half of the number of anxiety cases (69.98%) in the university environment alone.

Following this assumption, it is proven that relating lifestyle, the competitive environment and demands for better performance, among other factors, harm the university student outside the academic field, such as professional life and demands in other areas, in addition to the lack of time reserved for moments of leisure and well-being, factors that are extremely important for maintaining mental health.

Based on the research analyzed in order to collect important data, it can be concluded that an urgent reformulation in the higher education educational system is necessary, while the high levels of stress and overload due to the numerous responsibilities in young adults and which are not restricted only to the academic sphere, but which extend to social environments, such as the pressure imposed for these individuals to follow a pre-determined pattern of success in their future careers, the absence of family as a means of

support and reception at this time of so many changes and transitions, demotivation due to lack of support from educational institutions are other factors that contribute to the psychic overload of these students.

Regarding stress management, students stated that relaxing practices that they enjoy are an efficient way to reduce their stress levels, and they point to music and physical exercise as a means of relieving part of this accumulated tension. Moretti and Hubner in 2017, stated the existence of a correlation between anxiety and stress, being a response to excessive stimulation from the other.

In a second analysis, it was confirmed that women have a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms, corroborating the literature, which points to the prevalence of depression in women as double the prevalence in men, according to Fernandes *et al.* (2018). A possible explanation may be related to cultural factors.

Firstly, depressive symptoms (sadness, crying) are at odds with social ideals of masculinity, that is, men may be reluctant to report experiencing these symptoms. Second, men's experiences of depression may manifest with symptoms that are not currently included in traditional diagnostic criteria, such as anger, self-destructive behavior, self-distraction, use of psychoactive substances, addiction to gambling or excessive work, and relationship with multiple partners. (Souza IMDM, *et al.*).

It can be inferred that excessive overload without certain rest actively harms the performance of young university students, affecting both physically and psychologically, in order to highlight the excessive wear and tear and new demands that arise daily through factors such as the nature of the work, absence social and administrative support, among other aspects.

Neves and Dalgalarondo (2007) were interested in examining the mental health of university students at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), based on this, between 2005 and 2006 they wrote and applied an anonymous questionnaire in which they obtained the participation of 1,300 students aged between 17 and 23, many of whom attended classes in various areas such as humanities, health and exact sciences. The authors were able to determine that 58% of students reported having a mental health problem, filtering that it is more common in women (69%) than in men (45%). The most common specific disorders included dysrhythmia (19.7%), depression (17.3%), agoraphobia (14.4%), mania (13.8%), generalized anxiety (13.4%), panic disorder (12%), among others. Additionally, the study found that those students who had difficulty with friends, and/or didn't have much parental support, and/or came from public schools were more likely to have these mental problems.

Neves and Dalgalarondo (2007) obtained very interesting results from all their research and came to the conclusion that in academia, women stand out in relation to men when it comes to the development of mental disorders, however, this fact is not subject to argument so that men do not have the same or other mental disorders; factors such as

the lack of support from family members, the lack of or problems in the social environment, especially when referring to the development of new relationships, were observable as factors of considerable weight in the increase in this mental illness, and they were also able to notice a curious index regarding to public school students. The authors highlighted the importance of understanding, welcoming and monitoring such students, as well as the greater frequency of addressing the topic of mental health among university students, we can a priori include a more rigorous and assertive observation with this group. Mental health is a subject that must always be taken seriously by the individual's entire social circle and when the student does not receive the necessary support from this circle, it must be provided by other means, otherwise there will be an overload and the development of disorders that can lead to serious consequences for a long time.

In order to discover the consequences generated by the fragmentation of working, studying and being a mother at the same time, Antloga, C., Monteiro, R., Bentes, A., Cassimiro, E., & Assunção, F. (2023) began a survey carried out with 453 university mothers where the average age of the participants was 27.2 years old, analyzing physical, psychological and social issues, with the aim of expanding the knowledge that mothers who are attending higher education could have impaired health and what types or degrees of damage are caused to these mothers, and that these damages could be reduced if the woman was not financially fragile and had family support. The research was carried out with pregnant women or mothers with children up to 5 years old from public or private institutions. The address of the website where the questionnaire was available was made available, it was shared on social networks in emails and even by teachers and researchers. The data were calculated after 3 months. Age, marital status, place of residence, educational institution, other degree completed, undergraduate course in progress, monthly family income, number of people who depend on the income, who they live with, number of children and age of each of the children, were questions asked in the questionnaire. It was noticed that as age increased, the number of children also increased. It appears that 63.9% were married or living in a stable union, while 31.2% were single, and 4.9% were divorced or separated. Looking at the graphs, it can be seen that women who earn less than two minimum wages, are single or do not live with their partners, have more serious psychological and social factors.

With a thoughtful look at university mothers Antloga, C., Monteiro, R., Bentes, A., Cassimiro, E., & Assunção, F. (2023) directed their research to understand the effects of this duality in the daily lives of these women, in a social, psychological and physical way. The authors concluded in their article the existence of such damage to these women, being even more heightened when there is the absence of a partner to share this burden, the lack of family support, and also financial issues. It is noticeable that the fact of being a higher education student and the responsibility carried by being a mother, individually carry a great emotional and psychic burden in themselves, when these obligations are

superimposed they become even heavier for a woman to deal with alone, without support and basic salaries, the authors emphasize that the combination of the two tasks can fit within the parameters of the word "work". Given this, it is noticeable that especially for low-income women who seek to improve their lives through higher education, motherhood ends up becoming another burden, the accumulation of these two roles results in serious damage, whether physical, psychological or social. To prevent this from happening, collective support (university, government and society) and the support of family members and the university (colleagues, teachers, directors and the entire teaching environment) are of great importance. It is extremely important that there is awareness towards these women, both in universities and in their social environment. It is also worth highlighting the importance of efficient psychological support, always paying attention to their mental health; Without such support bases, there is a high probability that university mothers will develop psychic overload.

Over the centuries, humanity has sometimes faced critical health conditions, such as devastating pandemics that have caused thousands of deaths over the years; in mid-2020 we had another one of these milestones, being called COVID-19. In order to understand how a pandemic on such a scale could affect stress, anxiety and depression in students, Maia and Dias (2020) set out to explore this topic in their article; therefore, they developed a survey with two samples: the 1st was composed of 460 Portuguese students, the vast majority of whom were women from different courses, with the most represented being psychology, communication sciences, medicine, social work and tourism. The 2nd, in turn, was made up of just 159 students, with an average age of 20 to 40 years old, the majority of whom were also female, with the most represented courses being psychology, nursing, communication sciences, tourism and geology. According to Maia and Dias (2020), the results of the questionnaires applied confirmed a significant increase in anxiety, depression and stress during the pandemic period, providing data based on research by Wang *et al.*, (2020); Weiss & Murdoch (2020) the increase in these problems was largely due to the large and growing number of positive cases of COVID-19, even though they were not the highest risk groups. However, the result of the worsening of the mental health of university students is not simply due to the epidemic period, the great load of psychological stress as a result of isolation and constant fear strongly influenced these aggravating factors.

Based on the studies of the articles referring to the set of data collected by Maia and Dias, together with the reinforcement of the aggravating situation of the 2020 epidemic by Weiss and Murdoc, it is of utmost importance to initiate more flexible and appropriate studies and methods in addition to of responsibility for dealing with university students within the university itself. The negative consequences after COVID-19 cannot be disregarded in the long term either, excessive extracurricular activities and overload with the university's academic routine can result in a return of cases of anxiety and depression in students and/or even worsen them. Students, in turn, may feel pressured into

the routine and not be able to talk about it directly with the University. In this case, it is important to have the company of colleagues and other students who understand that routine, in addition to the support of teachers who can understand the strangeness in the behavior of students, which is reflected in their grades or participation in the classroom.

The pandemic had a great influence on the behavior of young university students around the world and as a way of understanding the impacts of this phenomenon on the mental health of university students and on medical education, Rodrigues *et al.*, (2020) conducted a literature review synthesizing *articles* and books on the topic discussed in your article. They soon came to the conclusion that the psychopathological effects linked to quarantine and social isolation are heightened when a person has a previous psychological history, particularly anxiety, which can increase post-traumatic stress, and can occur in individuals previously isolated due to factors such as infection, frustration, inadequate information and financial situation; a study was carried out at the medical school in which the prevalence of depression among students was 35.5% and the prevalence of anxiety reached 22.1%, with the majority presenting a depressive state or anxiety, varying in mild and moderate. The results were similar to another study carried out at King Saud University's faculty of medicine, which noted that 23.5% of students felt depressed or discouraged. The impact of the pandemic makes students more concerned about their training and the possibility of finding a job or enrolling in future study programs, with interruptions to research and improvements. As a result, many mental disorders are triggered and/or triggered in this moment of instability, making the mental health of these individuals the focus of several studies. The authors bring as a possible means of solution to the scenario addressed the elaboration or better development of psychological support centers for students and the implementation of therapeutic sessions virtually, thus not being necessary to open institutions for such services in person, therefore not exposing individuals to life-threatening situations.

Based on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rodrigues *et al.*, (2020) through their literature review were able to conclude that the main factors in the development of psychological disorders in students were due to concern about their education, with the development of their respective careers and even with future study programs. Based on these facts, the authors came to the conclusion that educational institutions need to play a more present role in the lives of academics, especially with regard to the pandemic period where students become even more susceptible to the emergence and worsening of psychological instabilities, this vulnerability requires attention and care to avoid worsening, which makes the authors suggest the creation and implementation of support measures and therapy sessions, both in person and virtually. The worsening of mental health during the pandemic was an issue frequently addressed due to the increase in rates, its impacts are reflected even after the

event has occurred and entities cannot be impassive with the emotional state of their students.

It is evident, based on all the articles presented, that the mental health of higher education students is a topic that needs to be faced with due importance, the fact that numerous factors, both internal and external, can be causative agents and/or or those with mental disorders such as depression and anxiety are issues that cannot and should not be ignored by the entire educational system. If the lack of awareness on the part of educational institutions towards such students becomes completely unacceptable, it is essential that there is a more effective campaign to raise awareness and alert about mental health care, so it is also worth highlighting the importance of a focused support network and specialized in the topic, as well as this same understanding on the part of friends and family. It is undeniable that the student load, in its uniqueness, is exhausting and leads to exhaustion in many cases, therefore the implementation and construction of methods that include emotional support for this population layer is even more essential.

## 5. Conclusion

Considering that stress and anxiety represent significant challenges for university students, special attention to this issue is extremely important. The transition to higher education is a crucial moment for the psycho-emotional and social development of young people, worsened by the impact of the pandemic. Studies show that high levels of anxiety affect the majority of these students. Social pressure, difficulties in interpersonal relationships and the accumulation of academic and professional responsibilities are factors that contribute to this challenging scenario. Therefore, it is crucial to address these mental health issues among college students to promote a healthier environment and support the psychological well-being of this population.

In short, this study emphasizes the importance of a more comprehensive approach to higher education, which considers not only academic excellence, but also the mental health and well-being of students. Raising awareness of these issues and implementing appropriate support measures are essential to ensuring that college students can thrive in all areas of their lives without compromising their physical and mental health. It is time to rethink and reform the educational system to create a healthier environment conducive to the full development of young adults seeking higher education.

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