

## IMPACTS OF ACADEMIC PRESSURE ON HEALTH STUDENTS IN THE POST- PANDEMIC SCENARIO

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**Abstract:** INTRODUCTION: Among health students, there is great pressure to seek academic excellence to the detriment of quality of life. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a long isolation followed by the sudden return to greater social coexistence, which strengthened the problem, reflected in the increase in cases of depression and anxiety within universities. This study aims to describe the process and consequences of health science students returning to the academic context after the pandemic. METHODOLOGY: This study is an experience report. To support this, a literature review was carried out on the topic “Mental health among health students in the post-pandemic scenario”, using the PICOS strategy. 10 articles in Portuguese, English and Spanish between 2019 and 2023 were selected, based on relevance. One additional article was selected, resulting in 11 articles. The databases used were Scielo and Virtual Health Library. RESULTS: Reports from students highlighted the social pressures generated by the belief that they must already master medical knowledge, with ignorance at the beginning of training seen as synonymous with future professional inefficiency, in addition to describing a competitive academic space that strengthens self-demand. Many students arrive at the course in good health, but, due to the high demands, they develop mental disorders. Others arrived already weakened by the course entry process. Added to this were the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the well-being of academics, such as distance learning for an indefinite period due to isolation, which generated anxiety and uncertainty regarding the future, causing mental illness. CONCLUSION: The psychosocial consequences left by the Covid-19 pandemic add up to intense self-demand and external pressure for high university productivity. All of this contributes to stress, depression and anxiety, affecting the

quality of life of students.

**Keywords:** Mental health; Health Sciences Students; COVID-19; Quality of life; Student Health.

## INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an undeniable statement of the difficulties experienced by healthcare professionals on the front line. However, at the same time, among health students there was a huge demand for the quality of learning.

Due to the application of control and prevention measures taken by health authorities to limit the movement of people, and thus transmission, non-essential commercial sectors, such as schools and universities, were closed. Health courses have therefore undergone an emergency restructuring, with a large part of the course load being taught remotely, including practical content, inherent to medical practice. It is known that, in this context, there is an explicit pressure when it comes to the search for academic excellence among medical students, with an increased intrinsic demand in this emergency scenario, given the change in teaching models and the impossibility of certain classes. Furthermore, the difficulty in accessing the internet has affected not only health students, but the country as a whole, contributing to low performance.

Furthermore, even outside the pandemic scenario, high demands are a reality within health courses, to the point where students leave quality of life in the background, thus creating a fine line between what is considered ideal behavior and which constitutes mental health neglect. While it is possible to live in society without major harm to academic life, the tendency is to neglect one's own well-being. There have been major changes during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The succession of a long period of isolation and the sudden

return to greater social coexistence, without a period of adaptation, worsened the problem. This situation was significantly reflected in the increase in cases of depression and anxiety among university students. The study aims to identify the impacts resulting from the pandemic and analyze the mental health of health science students in the post-pandemic context.

## METHOD

The present study is an experience report. To support this, a literature review was carried out on the topic “Mental health among health students in the post-pandemic scenario”, using the PICOS strategy. We selected, in order of relevance, 10 articles over a period of 5 years (2019 - 2023) and the addition of 1 article from 2005 (for citation purposes) in the Virtual Health Library and Scielo databases, in the languages English, Portuguese and Spanish, totaling 11 articles.

## RESULTS

Reports from healthcare students highlighted the social pressures generated by the widespread belief that academics must already master medical knowledge, with lack of knowledge at the beginning of training being seen as synonymous with future professional inefficiency. With this, the perception is built and incorporated that as an apprentice and as a professional, the doctor must have all the knowledge possible and never make mistakes. This mentality contributes to students' exhaustion due to the attempt to achieve this illusory ideal, fostering a feeling of constant dissatisfaction and academic insufficiency. Furthermore, many interviewees reported a competitive and unempathetic academic space that creates uncomfortable situations, in addition to an environment that is intransigent to errors, which strengthens self-demand and perfectionism. All these points presented feed

self-destructive and stressful thoughts, which affect the mental health of these individuals. In this sense, a study was carried out with academics in the health field:

“In this research it was observed that approximately 50% of health students had symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, ranging from mild to very severe severity, and more than 20% had severe symptoms of these conditions”. (Freitas et al., 2023, p.10)

Such data materializes the ideas outlined above and reveals the seriousness of the issue in question. This entire situation exposes the mental health of medical students as a delicate and recent approach, which affects individuals before and during their academic training.

## ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AS A RESULT OF CUMULATIVE STRESS

Many students arrive at higher education with good quality mental health, but, due to the high demands and due to the factors exposed above, they develop mental disorders. Others, in the period of preparation for entrance exams aimed at competitive courses, such as Medicine, already show signs of damage and neglect mental health.

“To enter university is wrapped in a positive expectation about building the future.” (Demenech et al., 2023, p.20)

These expectations are placed on young people throughout high school, and in the subsequent years of college entrance exams. The selection process to enter health courses is permeated by scenarios similar to those observed in higher education: competitiveness, due to the limited number of places, and self-demand to achieve approval. This generates a history of anxiety and stress that is added to the new pressures suffered in higher education, with health students often already having a previous history of mental disorders. Therefore, mental health, already neglected in previous years, is aggravated by

the instability experienced during the period of entry into quarantine and its subsequent return to activities and demands, without due preparation.

### **IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE WELL-BEING OF ACADEMICS**

In addition to this situation, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the well-being of academics were added. In different case reports, students reported that the indefinite absence from curricular activities due to social isolation measures generated anxiety and uncertainty regarding their professional and personal future, causing psychological illness.

It is known that depression is a silent condition. Thus, many relapsed at this time of greater uncertainty, considering both the fear of infection by the virus and the possibility of a decrease in academic performance. The current context forced universities to make teaching more flexible, presenting online classes with content that must have been taught in the laboratory, reducing contact and discussion between classmates, which is also of immense importance for the construction of knowledge. Despite the development of several strategies to mitigate the impact of social isolation on teaching, as occurred at ``Universidade Estadual do Rio Grande do Norte`` (UERN), several gaps in experience and learning remained that could not be filled through these alternative routes.

“This involves the development and implementation of a strategy whose objectives were to encourage the permanence of medical students on the course, during the period of suspension of curricular activities at UERN, and to provide learning opportunities, by remote means, with the capture of credits in activities complementary, through participation in institutionalized research and extension actions”. (Felisberto et al., 2020, p.3)

The excellence of this and other projects developed during the pandemic, in order to alleviate the impacts of social isolation on the teaching of health sciences, is undeniable. However, these mechanisms cannot be compared with the quality of face-to-face classes, especially laboratory classes and consultations, with students in the initial periods being more neglected in this aspect. Thus, with the sudden return of activities, new pressure arose for the need to “make up for lost time” among students.

Furthermore, there is a correlation in the development of these three conditions, depression, chronic anxiety and panic syndrome. Returning to the concept of anxiety:

“Anxiety has psychological and physiological components, being characterized by sensations of anticipation, fear or apprehension associated with excitement and autonomous reactivity. Although depressive symptoms may be present, they tend to be secondary or less severe, being characterized by affective manifestations of inadequate intensity or frequency. Panic disorder, a specific type of anxiety disorder, is characterized by recurrent, unexpected panic attacks followed by at least a month of persistent worry about having another attack or its consequences.” (Montiel et al., 2005, p.33)

This way, the three conditions correlate. Thinking about the anxiety generated by academic pressure, depression directly related to social isolation, and panic attacks related to the fear of infection and the sudden return to social life.

It is important to avoid generalizations, knowing that each individual has had a unique experience facing the loss of relatives, friends and unique difficulties during the pandemic. However, a correlation can be observed between these three variables, which must be evaluated in depth in future studies.

Furthermore, in this scenario, several

projects were developed at universities in order to listen to students regarding their needs, such as the “Escuta Solidária” project developed at “Universidade Federal de Fortaleza” (Unifor).

“This subproject, named “Solidarity Listening”, aimed to reduce the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, offering psychological assistance to students who, in times of crisis, were faced with the risk of contagion from the disease and experienced psychological problems related to the disease. uncertainty regarding returning to classes, the feeling of insecurity, the workload associated with the period of confinement, etc.” (Correia, 2023, p.3)

This way, we can see a movement towards intervention in the face of the problem. However, there is a significant demand for other mechanisms that improve the quality of life in the academic field, in order to reduce these impacts and difficulties experienced by students.

## **DISCUSSION**

In view of the deterioration in the quality of life of students in the health area in the post-pandemic period, there is a need for

an in-depth analysis of the consequences on the mental health of students in the long term. During the pandemic period, there was a major change in the view of healthcare professionals, who began to be seen as “heroes” due to the various risks to which they were subjected. The perspective of the role of a health professional may have led students to imagine the possibility of dealing with similar demands in the future. Furthermore, this process affected the professional development of these students, highlighting, once again, the cumulative and silent bias of depression and anxiety. Given these hypotheses, the need to develop future studies analyzing subsequent impacts on the professional lives of these academics is evident.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The psychosocial consequences left by the Covid-19 pandemic add up to intense self-demand and external pressure for high university productivity. All of this favors the high incidence of stress, depression and anxiety in academics. This set of factors is associated with damage to the mental health of students, affecting their quality of life.



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