

## HEALTH EDUCATION: SELF-ESTEEM AS A TOPIC FOR ADOLESCENTS IN A STATE SCHOOL IN CURITIBA, STATE OF PARANÁ

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**Abstract: Introduction:** Self-esteem is an important indicator of mental health in adolescence. Disturbances during this period are known to trigger intense psychological suffering, related to physical appearance, interpersonal relationships, and functional capacity. To alleviate the anguish, teenagers may resort to self-harm. Thus, this case report aimed to promote reflection on self-esteem in adolescents and reinforce the role of health professionals in this context. **Case description:** The activity was developed by medical students supervised by the professor of Teaching and Community Integration at College Pequeno Príncipe, in Curitiba, state of Paraná. The Community Health Agent from the Basic Health Unit (BHU) presented the case of the state school in the territory, where cases of self-mutilation had been reported among students in the 6th and 7th grades. **Technique or situation:** The gymkhana was based on drawing commands such as “Give yourself a compliment”, “Give a compliment to the colleague next to you” and other challenges such as “Nominate a colleague you trust a lot”. **Case discussion:** Low self-esteem can result in emotional distress, depression, anxiety, social isolation, and substance abuse. During the activity, several factors were identified to be analyzed, such as the relationship between students and the relationship with self-image. All students participated and managed to praise themselves, even if some had difficulty. Few praised their own physical appearance, and others briefly expressed their feelings but everyone showed sensitivity by praising their colleagues. **Conclusion:** The dynamics developed in the classroom encouraged students to reflect on themselves and others. More strategies addressing self-esteem and other conflicts in adolescence are needed, as well as a closer proximity between the school and the BHU.

**Keywords:** Health education. Teaching and

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, the period between childhood and adulthood, is marked by personal changes, in the physical, behavioral, and emotional spheres<sup>9</sup>. This transition is influenced by social issues, mainly involving the family<sup>9</sup> and school environment. At this moment, there is a need for a feeling of belonging to a group<sup>1</sup>, which, when not achieved satisfactorily, can lead to frustration. Therefore, this development process is crucial in the formation of personal identity and self-esteem of individuals<sup>9</sup>.

Self-esteem is defined by Coopersmith (1989)<sup>4</sup> and Rosenberg (1989)<sup>11</sup> as *“the evaluation people make and maintain about themselves. It expresses a feeling or attitude of approval or disgust towards oneself and refers to the extent to which a subject considers himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy.”* Steinberg (1999)<sup>13</sup> and Bandeira (2010)<sup>2</sup> consider self-esteem as an important indicator of mental health in adolescence, which can be correlated with school performance and social approval. Therefore, the process of forming a self-concept becomes extremely important.

However, disturbances during this period can trigger intense psychological suffering<sup>1</sup>, with regard to concerns about physical appearance, interpersonal relationships, and functional capacity. Among the many influences suffered by adolescents about body image, the media stand out, mainly television and the internet, which publicize and value the perfect body.<sup>7</sup> Body dissatisfaction increases according to the exposure of perfect bodies by the media, which has provoked an incessant and compulsive search for the ideal body.<sup>7</sup>

To alleviate intense psychological suffering, adolescents may cause self-mutilation<sup>1</sup>. Self-mutilation is a behavior that results in damage to the individual's own body, but without

the intention of suicide, on the contrary, it is considered a form of escape<sup>15</sup>. Studies demonstrate the increasing occurrence of cases of self-harm in schools<sup>1</sup>, especially among female adolescents<sup>1,5,15</sup>. This can be manifested by any way of causing injuries to oneself, including ingestion of substances, drugs, objects, or acts that cause pain, such as cuts, punctures, hitting, burns, scratches, or scratching and poking until causing injuries to the body<sup>3</sup>. Self-mutilation has proven to be a public health problem due to its increasing exposure and manifestation in society. This behavior can occur both in the presence and absence of a disease. Thus, it may be present in several diseases and several different ways; the identification of mutilating behaviors can contribute to understanding what caused this attitude and also how to continue managing the patient.<sup>15</sup>

The Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) is the most commonly used scale to assess body appreciation. In its development, attention was paid to the association of BAS scores with symptoms of eating disorders and indices of well-being, such as self-esteem and optimism.<sup>7</sup>

The search of adolescents and young people for the ideal body image can lead them to reach inadequate Body Mass Index (BMI) values and develop various eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Initially, to evaluate these relationships, the physician must define whether the patient is underweight, normal, overweight, or obese, using BMI as a parameter<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, body dissatisfaction can lead young people to resort to unnecessary plastic surgeries, aesthetic procedures, and intense and exhausting physical activity.<sup>12</sup>

The role of the school in this problem is also highlighted. The school must promote a space for speech and dialogue with students so that they can talk about their anxieties and what bothers them. To achieve this, it is

necessary to guarantee a listening space that is confidential and allows students to feel confident and safe.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the importance of the topic for public health, and the context in which self-esteem is developed, such as at school, this case report aimed to promote reflection on self-esteem, body image, and self-mutilation in adolescents and young people, in addition to reinforcing the role of health professionals in this context.

## **CASE DESCRIPTION**

The activity was developed by medical students under the supervision of a professor of Teaching and Community Integration at College Pequeno Príncipe, in Curitiba, state of Paraná. This dynamic should cover the following learning objectives: Reflect on the history of the SUS and its functioning; Relate the organization of Primary Care to health services in Curitiba; Investigate the demographic, socioeconomic, environmental, and epidemiological aspects of the community and the actions of the Primary Health Care teams, analyzing health indicators; Analyze epidemiological scientific studies, related to Primary Health Care (PHC).

With these objectives in mind, the Community Health Agent (CHA) of the selected Basic Health Unit (BHU) presented the case of the state school in the territory, where cases of self-mutilation had been reported among students in the 6th and 7th grades (11 to 15 years old). Through a meeting with the school's local principal, the team was provided with detailed guidance regarding the students' needs.

Based on the topics discussed, the undergraduates developed an activity to stimulate students' self-esteem in a playful way, to prevent depressive episodes, low self-esteem, and self-mutilation from occurring. Furthermore, the activity also aimed to

reinforce the role of BHU and schools in primary prevention, guiding them to seek help in these locations.

The BHU monitors the neighborhood's peculiar conditions, through the complex and detailed work of the CHA, monitoring each family in their own homes. Children at risk are registered so that appropriate measures can be taken. With respect to the dynamics carried out at the school, students reported how they used the service, then they were instructed about all the functions the unit can provide to strengthen the bond.

## **TECHNIQUE OR SITUATION**

The dynamic was carried out on April 11, 2019, in the afternoon, with groups of 4 medical undergraduates for each class of students in the 6th and 7th grades of Elementary School at a state school in Curitiba, state of Paraná. Before starting, the chairs were arranged in a circle so that all participants could face each other. The gymkhana was based on drawing commands such as "Give yourself a compliment", "Give a compliment to the colleague next to you" and other challenges such as "Nominate a colleague you trust a lot". The objective of the activity was to stimulate participants' self-analysis and, mainly, self-esteem, making them individually realize their qualities and also with the help of colleagues and friends. The activity aimed to make them highlight positive characteristics in themselves that would often go unnoticed in their own eyes.

Furthermore, to better interact with students, medical undergraduates would go without their coats. In this way, students would feel more comfortable participating in the dynamics and interacting with the applicators. Another motivation for the group to feel encouraged to participate was the use of prizes (candies, sweets, and lollipops). Among the dynamic commands, there were

some such as “Choose a colleague to receive a prize”.

This moment was also used to reinforce the role of the school board and all BHU professionals in helping with issues of aggression, bullying, self-mutilation, and any other health problems.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE CASE WITH LITERATURE REVIEW**

Low self-esteem can result in emotional suffering, depression, anxiety, social isolation, and substance abuse, and it is up to the physician and family to seek preventive measures to ensure that fewer and fewer children and adolescents suffer from such attitudes<sup>14</sup>. Thus, this role of physicians in prevention can be carried out through activities that promote self-confidence and self-esteem, and at the same time, professionals have the role of explaining bullying and its harm, in addition to recognizing possible victims and aggressors.

During the activity proposed by medical undergraduates, several important factors were identified to be analyzed, such as the relationship between students and the relationship with self-image. The undergraduates first sought to establish a bond of trust between the students so that before approaching such a delicate topic, they could initially have a good doctor-patient relationship. According to studies, physicians must be interested, explain clearly, and be accessible<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the use of lab coats was abandoned and the medical students sought to demonstrate empathy. With this conduct, during the dynamic and afterward, some had more affinity with each other, while others interacted less with their colleagues, demonstrating, therefore, that this forced isolation favored introspective behavior. However, all students participated and managed to praise themselves, even if some

had difficulties. Those who were in doubt always received positive reinforcement from their colleagues. Few students praised their own physical appearance, focusing more on adjectives such as “I’m nice, I’m friendly”. This can demonstrate insecurity regarding one’s own physical appearance. Others expressed their feelings towards themselves briefly, but everyone showed sensitivity by praising their colleagues and demonstrating empathy during the activity. At the end of the activity, all students showed a lot of enthusiasm and interest in talking more with the medical undergraduates. In this sense, the importance and impact of school interaction on adolescents’ self-esteem was observed.

The exchange of experiences was not limited to the moment of the dynamic, since even after its end, one of the participants decided to tell the medical undergraduates about the vulnerable situation in which she found herself, as she was a victim of mistreatment in her family context. Child abuse affects many children around the world and it is up to health professionals to raise suspicions and report child abuse and neglect<sup>8</sup>. In the case of the student in question, the health agent was called, as was the school principal, but she was already under BHU protection measures. At that moment, it was realized that the message that the BHU and health professionals also have the role of protecting them, was seized.

Therefore, the activity aimed to provide greater self-knowledge to students, helping to build self-esteem. Furthermore, the dynamics also served to reinforce the bond between students and health professionals, in addition to improving the role of the BHU in primary prevention.

Finally, the dynamics as a whole showed the need for multidisciplinary attention to combat future mental health issues in children and adolescents, in addition to helping them with issues such as self-esteem and self-



care. Additionally, it emphasizes the social responsibility of physicians in identifying potential mistreatment and violence, as well as promoting health education. Regarding the importance of the topic, it becomes evident that activities like the one conducted are beneficial for both the community and healthcare professionals. These activities provide the community with an opportunity to voice their concerns, express their doubts, and learn about new topics. Simultaneously, they help healthcare professionals better understand their community's demands, promote health education, and build better doctor-patient relationships to enhance care and adherence to activities organized by the BHU.

## CONCLUSION

In this way, it is clear that adolescence is a period of diverse personal and social conflicts, which are often best addressed with the help of professionals familiar with the

topic. In addition to issues related to physical appearance, the adolescents had difficulties in coping with other situations, such as the issue of mistreatment within the family reported by one of the students, making it evident the need to address these issues and refer them to other professionals when necessary, such as social workers.

The establishment of a space for listening and exchanging information and experience between adolescents and medical undergraduates proved to be very satisfactory, as the students were successful in sharing their feelings among themselves, in addition to recognizing internal characteristics. The dynamics developed in the classroom encouraged students to reflect on themselves and others and prompted teenagers to seek professional help when needed, guiding them on how to do so. This emphasizes the need to develop more strategies addressing self-esteem and other conflicts in adolescence, as well as to promote closer ties between the school and the Basic Health Unit.

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