

Social distancing and COVID-19: strategies adopted by Nursing students

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Objective: identify which coping strategies have been adopted by Nursing students at a public university in the face of the difficulties experienced during the social distancing and the COVID-19 pandemic. **Method:** cross-sectional study, conducted with 148 students, from an online questionnaire. The statistical analysis was carried out through descriptive analysis of the data, presenting the results by absolute and relative frequencies and measures of central tendency. **Results:** a small portion was found to be infected with SARS-CoV-2 (6.1%). In contrast, 39.9% reported that some family member was infected. In relation to those who used coping strategies (91.2%), the adoption of hobbies (49.3%) and the performance of physical activities (26.4%) stand out. It is noted that both were also related to means to get away from the lived situation and/or in the attempt to escape negative thoughts. **Conclusion:** the results indicate that the support of the university is necessary, based on actions focused on the mental health of nursing students, enhancing strategies that are effective in improving the well-being and reducing the stress of students, susceptible to psychic illness, from the experiences and fears of the university environment.

Descriptors: Mental Health; Students; Students, Health Occupations; Coronavirus Infections; Social Isolation; Adaptation, Psychological.

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Distanciamento social e COVID-19: estratégias adotadas por estudantes de Enfermagem

Objetivo: identificar quais estratégias de enfrentamento foram adotadas por estudantes de Enfermagem de uma universidade pública perante as dificuldades vivenciadas no decorrer do distanciamento social e da pandemia da COVID-19. **Método:** estudo transversal, realizado com 148 estudantes, a partir de questionário *on-line*. A análise estatística foi realizada por meio de análise descritiva dos dados, apresentando os resultados por frequências absolutas e relativas e medidas de tendência central. **Resultados:** constatou-se que uma pequena parcela foi infectada por SARS-CoV-2 (6,1%). Em contrapartida, 39,9% relataram que algum familiar foi infectado. Em relação aos que utilizaram estratégias de enfrentamento (91,2%), destacam-se a adoção de *hobbies* (49,3%) e a realização de atividades físicas (26,4%). Nota-se que ambas estiveram relacionadas também a meios para o afastamento da situação vivida e/ou na tentativa de fuga de pensamentos negativos. **Conclusão:** os resultados apontam ser necessário o apoio da universidade, a partir de ações com enfoque na saúde mental dos estudantes de Enfermagem, potencializando as estratégias que sejam eficazes na melhoria do bem-estar e na diminuição do estresse dos alunos, suscetíveis ao adoecimento psíquico, a partir das vivências e receios do meio universitário.

Descritores: Saúde Mental; Estudantes; Estudantes de Ciências da Saúde; Infecções por Coronavírus; Distanciamento Social; Adaptação Psicológica.

Distanciamiento social y COVID-19: estrategias adoptadas por estudiantes de Enfermería

Objetivo: identificar qué estrategias de afrontamiento fueron adoptadas por estudiantes de enfermería en una universidad pública en vista de las dificultades experimentadas durante la distancia social y la pandemia de Covid-19. **Método:** estudio transversal, realizado con 148 alumnos, utilizando un cuestionario en línea. El análisis estadístico se realizó a través del análisis de datos descriptivos, presentando los resultados por frecuencias absolutas y relativas y medidas de tendencia central. Para el análisis de asociación, se utilizó la prueba de chi-cuadrado, adoptando un nivel de significación del 5%. **Resultados:** se encontró que una pequeña porción estaba infectada con SARS-CoV-2 (6.1%). En contraste, el 39.9% informó que algún miembro de la familia estaba infectado. Con respecto a quienes usaron estrategias de afrontamiento (91.2%), se destaca la adopción de pasatiempos (49.3%) y actividades físicas (26.4%). Cabe señalar que ambos también estaban relacionados con formas de eliminar la situación experimentada y/o en un intento de escapar de los pensamientos negativos. **Conclusión:** los resultados apuntan a la necesidad de apoyo universitario, basado en acciones enfocadas en la salud mental de los estudiantes de enfermería, lo que permite mejorar las estrategias que son efectivas para mejorar el bienestar y reducir el estrés de los estudiantes, previamente susceptibles a enfermedades psíquico basado en las experiencias y temores del entorno universitario.

Descriptores: Salud Mental; Estudiantes; Estudiantes del Área de la Salud; Infecciones por Coronavirus; Aislamiento Social; Adaptación Psicológica.

Introduction

In 2019, a new strain of Coronavirus began to generate concern in China. There was a considerable growth of pneumonia cases in the city of Wuhan. Subsequently, on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) decreed a Public Health Emergency of International Importance, and cases were quickly identified on virtually all continents. In February 2020, this new strain was called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome of Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), responsible for Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)⁽¹⁾.

Worldwide, measures have been adopted to contain the advance of the disease in order to interrupt the high transmissibility of the virus, such as hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, the use of facial masks for non-professional use, and both social and physical distance⁽²⁾.

This is achieved through strategies such as social distancing and quarantine⁽³⁾. At this point, considering the transmission, the social distancing becomes important when decreasing the virus propagation, mainly in places where community transmission is present, that is, where the connections between the cases are not clear⁽³⁻⁴⁾.

Among the actions aimed at social distancing, the closing of schools and universities stand out⁽³⁻⁴⁾. To this end, in Brazil, each state has adopted specific measures to minimize the impact of COVID-19. In Espírito Santo, in particular, the total closing of the educational units took place on March 23, 2020⁽⁵⁾.

This whole situation directly impacts the population's health. Any process of illness that reaches a large population contingent generates psychosocial consequences, especially in the context of a pandemic like the one triggered by SARS-CoV-2⁽⁶⁾. Thus, psychosocial changes are expected and can be seen as reactions to an unusual situation experienced. However, an increase in new cases of mental disorders is estimated according to the magnitude of the event and the access to psychosocial actions⁽⁶⁾. The fear of getting sick or dying, of losing a loved one, of transmitting the virus to a relative, the fear of accessing health services for fear of contamination and of losing livelihoods are issues that directly influence the mental health of the population during the pandemic⁽⁷⁾. However, measures aimed at reducing social interaction - an essential strategy to reduce the transmission of the virus - contribute to psychic illness⁽⁸⁻¹⁰⁾. The limitation of coming and going, the possibility of changes in future plans and the sudden separation of the social and family circle may be associated with cases of anxiety and depression⁽⁹⁻¹⁰⁾.

Family distance, the pressure for good academic performance, relationships with people with different backgrounds and the possible brief insertion in the job market are factors that can trigger psychic illness in

college students. With the pandemic, these existing fears and feelings can be potentiated, contributing to this illness. In view of the above, this article aimed to identify the strategies adopted by Nursing students in confronting the social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

This is a descriptive research, with a quantitative approach, carried out with Nursing students enrolled in a university in Espírito Santo - Brazil. At the time of the research, there were 240 students enrolled in the course in question. For this purpose, the sample calculation in the Epi Info software was adopted as a criterion, with a 95% confidence level, 5% accuracy and 50% prevalence, resulting in 148 students who answered the questionnaire and accepted the Free and Informed Consent Term (FICT). Nursing students duly enrolled and who, at the time of the research, were 18 years or older were included. As an exclusion criterion, the incomplete completion of the questionnaire was adopted.

The awareness of students was carried out online, with invitations sent by the course collegiate and dissemination of the research and its objectives in social media of the Free Academic Nursing Center, and the invitation was reinforced a few times to reach students who had not responded. The data was collected over a three-week period, from June 29 to July 10, 2020, when students filled out a semi-structured online questionnaire that covered issues such as socio-demographic information, health status, academic background, SARS-CoV-2 infection, and coping strategies in the face of difficulties experienced during social withdrawal from the pandemic. The link of the questionnaire was sent to the students, together with the FICT for joint completion, through the institutional e-mail, in view of the suspension of face-to-face activities.

The statistical analysis was performed by the Statistical Package for Social Science software, version 22, through descriptive data analysis. The results were presented by means of absolute and relative frequencies and central tendency measures.

For this study, the ethical requirements established by Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council were followed, with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Espírito Santo with CAAE 30847420.6.0000.5060 and Opinion No. 4.029.745. In addition, all participants agreed with the FICT.

Results

A total of 148 Nursing students participated in the survey, corresponding to 61.7% of the regularly enrolled

students. Among those surveyed, the majority are female (89%), with an average age of 22.9 (SD=4.9), resident in the state capital (Vitória - 39.2%), have no work activity (89.9%), and report having religion (80.4%) (Table 1).

Table 1 - Sociodemographic information of students from the Nursing course, Vitória, ES, Brazil, 2020 (n = 148)

Variable		N	%
Gender	Female	132	89.2%
	Male	16	10.8%
			100%
Municipality of residence	Vitória	58	39.2%
	Vila Velha	29	19.6%
	Serra	26	17.5%
	Other	18	12.2%
	Cariacica	15	10.1%
	Viana	2	1.4%
			100%
Work activity	Does not work	133	89.9%
	Has a job	15	10.1%
			100%
Religion	Yes	119	80.4%
	No	29	19.6%
			100%

As for questions related to the university, 56.1% are satisfied with the choice of course and 62.8% perform extracurricular activities, such as monitoring and participation in research and/or extension projects. When analyzing the answers by period, a certain homogeneity is observed, with a slight predominance of the sixth period, with 16.9% of the total answers (Table 2).

Table 2 - Academic information and satisfaction with the course reported by Nursing students, Vitória, ES, Brazil, 2020 (n = 148)

Variável		N	%
Satisfaction with the course	Dissatisfied	2	1.4%
	Very satisfied	50	33.7%
	Not very satisfied	13	8.8%
	Satisfied	83	56.1%
			100.0%

(to be continued...)

Variável		N	%
Semester	1 st semester	15	10.1%
	2 nd semester	15	10.1%
	3 rd semester	18	12.2%
	4 th semester	16	10.8%
	5 th semester	15	10.1%
	6 th semester	25	16.9%
	7 th semester	16	10.8%
	8 th semester	19	12.8%
Enrolled in subjects from different semester		9	6.2%
			100.0%
Extracurricular activities	Yes	93	62.8%
	No	55	37.2%
			100.0%

When observing the aspects related to the health of the students, it is noted that a portion reports having been infected by SARS-CoV-2 (6.1%) and an even larger portion reports infection of relatives (39.9%). However, no information was obtained about the confirmation of the infection through laboratory tests. Regarding the presence of chronic physical problems, 9.5% indicated in a positive way. As for the report of psychological problems, 50.7% said they had them and 63.5% mentioned demands from previous periods. It should be noted that, in this item, the students were not informed what the "psychological problems" would be and, thus, the understanding of the term was given in a subjective manner. At the end of the items related to health aspects, regarding the use of psychoactive substances, there was a predominance of alcohol use (53.4%) in relation to the report of tobacco use (6.1%) (Table 3).

Table 3 - Health aspects reported by students of the Nursing course, Vitória, ES, Brazil, 2020 (n = 148)

Variable		N	%
SARS-CoV-2* infection	Yes	9	6.1%
	No	139	93.9%
			100%
SARS-CoV-2* family member infection	Yes	59	39.9%
	No	89	60.1%
			100%
Chronic physical problem	Yes	14	9.5%
	No	134	90.5%
			100%

(to be continued...)

Variable		N	%
Current psychological problem	Yes	75	50.7%
	No	73	49.3%
			100%
Past psychological problem	Yes	95	64.2%
	No	53	35.8%
			100%
Alcohol use	Yes	79	53.4%
	No	69	46.6%
			100%
Tobacco use	Yes	9	6.1%
	No	139	93.9%
			100%

*SARS-CoV-2 = Coronavirus strain responsible for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2

Most students report that they have implemented some strategy to address the difficulties experienced during the social distancing and pandemic of COVID-19 (91.2%, or 135 students). In several situations, more than one strategy was adopted simultaneously. Among the main strategies reported in the survey, the following stand out (Table 4): the realization of diverse hobbies (49.3%), for example reading, listening to music and computer games; the realization of physical activities (26.4%); the maintenance of social contacts via online (14.9%); the adoption of healthy habits (12.8%), such as sleep regulation and change in eating habits.

Table 4 - Confrontation strategies adopted by students of the Nursing course, Vitória, ES, Brazil, 2020

Variable	N	%
Various Hobbies	73	49.3%
Physical activities	39	26.4%
Online social contact	22	14.9%
Healthy habits	19	12.8%
Integrative and Complementary Practices	18	12.2%
Avoid news/discussions about the pandemic	17	11.5%
Adopted strategies		
Domestic activities	15	10.1%
Family life	15	10.1%
Religion	13	8.8%
Sleep or eat (both in excess)	10	6.8%
Extracurricular activities at the university	7	4.7%
Work/internship	7	4.7%
Positive thinking	7	4.7%
Professional monitoring	6	4.1%
Online courses	6	4.1%

Discussion

Faced with the intensification of the pandemic in all countries and the prolonged need for social detachment,

it is possible to note that, with the spread of the virus, there is the spread of collective fear and negative feelings, which may have a passing character, but also remain after the pandemic period⁽¹⁴⁾. It is in this context that students have adopted ways to deal with these feelings, using strategies to confront both the moment experienced and the consequences generated by it.

In the last decades, qualified listening has been much desired to deal with stressful situations, since it consists of a concern with what is exposed by the individual, by verbal and non-verbal means, and thus contributes to the development of attitude changes, both in the individual and interpersonal spheres⁽¹⁵⁾. Therefore, psychological interventions, such as follow-up by a senior professional, play a key role in adopting strategies to minimize the mental health implications during the COVID-19 pandemic⁽¹⁶⁻¹⁷⁾. In this sense, on March 26, 2020, Resolution CFP No. 4/2020 was published, which regulates psychological care through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), thus suspending Articles 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8 of Resolution CFP No. 11/2018 and facilitating access to this type of support, since face-to-face care is hampered due to the current situation⁽¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁾. In this study, a small portion of the students reported being under professional follow-up during the pandemic and this fact can be explained by the difficult access to qualified professionals by this population. Regardless of the period of the pandemic, the number of psychological care offered by the university to students is much lower than the demand, so few students performed follow-up before the pandemic. In addition, social detachment has made this process even more difficult so that it can compromise the follow-up of cases of already diagnosed disorders and cause the absence of the necessary care for those who are in psychic distress during the pandemic. It is also important to emphasize the importance of the use of active listening not only by Psychology professionals, but by the whole multiprofessional team, especially the nurse, since this methodology is an important tool for an effective Nursing process.

The period experienced brought changes in routines and daily habits of people, including changes in sleep. It is known that sleep plays a fundamental role in the immune system and emotional regulation, and that the changes and disorders produced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may have direct consequences for mental health and, equally, for physical health⁽²⁰⁾. Some students participating in the survey reported that sleeping helps them cope with the pandemic and social withdrawal. However, when the act of sleeping is related to an irregular sleep pattern, the strategy can be considered negative, considering the physiological and emotional factors already mentioned. On the other

hand, when associated with a change of habits in order to regulate sleep and improve its quality, as exposed by some students, it can be considered as a strategy of positive confrontation.

Some students have adopted more active confrontation mechanisms related to the practice of physical activities, which can be understood as the realization of movements using the musculoskeletal system that requires spending energy beyond the basal⁽²¹⁾. The literature indicates the practice of physical activity as a means of prevention of diseases and non-pharmacological treatment of a number of diseases, in addition to providing the feeling of physical and mental well-being⁽²¹⁾. During the pandemic, the practice of exercises in a home environment can be a way to reduce the negative impacts of social withdrawal because the practice of these activities is considered capable of contributing to the decrease of symptoms of depression and anxiety⁽²²⁾. At this point, the activities and physical exercises used by students (domestic activities, exercise routines, walking and others), although distinct, follow similar purposes in the context of the pandemic. The use of physical activities as a strategy to withdraw and/or escape negative thoughts is already described and studied. In addition, the results after the practice, such as the feeling of achievement and pride, may be responsible for improvements in self-confidence and mood⁽²³⁾.

Food-related strategies can be considered positive or negative, since they directly impact the individual's health⁽²⁴⁾. Thus, when associated with a change in habits in order to make food healthier, it can be considered a strategy of positive confrontation due to the benefits for physical and mental health. However, during a pandemic period, studies have indicated an increase in anxiety cases in university students⁽²⁵⁾ so that when food is associated with this anxiety, there is an increase in daily calorie consumption⁽²⁶⁻²⁷⁾ and disassociation to healthy habits - as presented in most of the reports of this research.

As well as physical activities, the realization of Integrative and Complementary Practices (ICP) was also adopted by students. These practices are elements of the so-called complementary medicine or alternative medicine. This form of intervention can be described as a group of alternative health care activities, that is, they do not configure the framework of conventional medicine practices and, although they have grown exponentially in recent years in health systems, they are not yet fully integrated into them and are generally used in an inter or concomitant manner with traditional medicine⁽²⁸⁾. Since the recognition of ICP as a means of health promotion, several studies have been carried out with the objective of describing the gains in well-being resulting from

adherence to these practices and have proven their effectiveness. Yoga, for example, is described as a potentially active activity in reducing anxiety symptoms that can be used as a non-pharmacological means of treatment⁽²⁹⁾.

Adopted by a portion of the students, religiosity can be considered an important factor in reviewing, reinventing and reorganizing relationships and experiences in pandemic times⁽³⁰⁾ in order to boost the search for a sense or meaning to the circumstance experienced and to favor its confrontation⁽³¹⁾.

Another strategy of confrontation that is widely adhered to by students was the use of hobbies as a means of distraction. Currently, in the scientific literature⁽³²⁾, these activities that are pleasing to the individual are already described as associated with improving well-being, promoting mental health and reducing stress, in addition to providing the feeling of satisfaction. Some hobbies are already widely used with therapeutic intention, like listening to music. Music therapy has been proving its effectiveness in health promotion, as well as in the prevention and treatment of mental health-related diseases⁽³³⁾.

Throughout life, one can notice that, more and more, the human being seeks ways to protect himself, and the adoption of strategies of confrontation is also a form of protection, in this case focusing on mental health. However, not all the mechanisms adopted will be efficient in the long run. As an example, there is the strategy of avoiding news and/or discussions about the pandemic, in order to get away from the stressful situation, which can be seen in the response of some students. If, on the one hand, the removal of the problem can momentarily help to reduce anxiety or negative feelings, on the other hand, this strategy prevents the feelings and impulses from surfacing, being suppressed and the situation can get worse. Furthermore, the greater the escape, the lower the capacity to handle the stress⁽³⁴⁻³⁵⁾.

While escape is a potentially negative strategy, there are the interpersonal relationships going in the opposite direction. Although the situation of a pandemic requires a physical distancing, interacting and exchanging experiences with other individuals who go through similar situations has already proved to have a beneficial effect on mental health⁽³⁶⁾. In this way, the use of ICTs and living with people living in the family nucleus have been means used to supply the human need for interaction, reducing social distance. Human relationships can be beneficial in coping with bad situations and interactions can be potentially reductive of stress levels⁽³⁶⁾.

At the university where this research was carried out, Nursing students need to complete 105 hours in

extracurricular activities⁽³⁷⁾. Thus, during graduation, students get involved in research activities, extension, volunteer internships, online courses and other activities. Thus, despite the suspension of classes during the pandemic period, many students are involved in university activities that have not been suspended, using, in some cases, the realization of these activities as a strategy to confront the pandemic. However, when associated with the feelings that were present during the pandemic of not being able to do things as planned, not being able to deal with the challenges and not having the necessary support from the people close to them, participation in these activities can lead to a feeling of overload⁽³⁸⁾, thus creating a fine line between being a negative or a positive strategy, since the feeling of productivity and of being useful also arises. These feelings can be experienced in the same way by those who use professional activity as a strategy for confronting.

Regarding the limitations of this study, one can find the difficulty in obtaining answers from students without internet access, since the interview was carried out by means of an online questionnaire. However, it is important to emphasize that, despite being a limiting factor, it did not make it impossible to carry out the study, only extending the period of data collection, and it became the necessary strategy to be adopted due to the suspension of the face-to-face activities.

Conclusion

This study was able to reaffirm that, when faced with stressful situations, individuals tend to create means of adaptation and overcoming. The vast majority of the participating Nursing students reported having adopted strategies to address the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the main ones, the adoption of hobbies and the practice of physical activities stand out, both of which were also related to ways to get away from the lived situation and/or in the attempt to escape from negative thoughts.

Thus, it should be emphasized that the adoption of confrontation measures does not mean success in the process, since the strategies may have a positive or negative impact on mental health, depending not only on the strategy adopted, but also on how it is being applied and managed by the student. In general, it can be defined that coping strategies are widely used and necessary to overcome unpleasant situations and can be potentially beneficial for the promotion of mental health when used in a manner guided by qualified professionals. Thus, it is necessary the support of the university, based on actions focused on the mental health of the students of Nursing, aiming to potentialize strategies that are effective in the improvement of

the well-being and in the reduction of the stress of the students, who are already previously exposed to situations with potential to generate psychic illness in relation to the experiences and fears of the qualified university-professional environment.

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