



# Doctoral dissertation investigates factors related to mental disorders in medical students

Gabriel Giordani / 25 de janeiro de 2024

**Health | Researcher analyzes the students' insights about medical training and points out the importance of individual and institutional actions that promote mental health**

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*\*Photo by: Flávio Dutra/Archive JUI/May 26th, 2020*

Over the years, the Brazilian society has been observing a growing rate in cases of mental disorders. Among young people aged 18 to 24, for example, the percentage of depressive symptoms doubled from 7.7% (before the pandemic) to 14.8% (1st quarter of 2022), according to data of [Covitel](#) Survey (Telephone Survey of Risk Factors for Chronic Non-Transmissible Diseases in Times of Pandemic).

One of the undergraduate programs which have been most targeted in relation to the mental health of students is Medicine. Among such research studies, [a doctoral dissertation from the Graduate Program in Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at UFRGS](#), which analyzed the incidence of binge drinking and symptoms of depression and/or anxiety associated to medical training, stood out.

The psychiatrist and author of the research, Tamires Bastos, supervised by professors Simone Hauck and Pricilla Laskoski, investigated sociodemographic and academic environment factors in connection to clinical symptomatology (like anxiety, depression and alcohol abuse) to identify potential access barriers to psychological/psychiatric treatment.

To conduct research, Tamires' methodology included dividing the study in two stages, one qualitative and the other quantitative. Firstly, in 2018, the researcher collected 10 analysis units (eight groups in focus and two interviews), addressing the students' perception in relation to the medical training at UFRGS.

As a result of this first stage, Tamires observed that the disorders are interconnected by socioeconomic factors that mutually interact with aspects of the academic environment (competition in the workplace, institutional structure, interpersonal relationships) and aspects of the future professional career, which poses several conflicts of expectations among students, their family, and society.

*"There is a culture of the omnipotent medical student who always needs to do more and work harder and who can't make mistakes. Excellence is often and mistakenly taken as perfection."*

— Tamires Bastos

In the quantitative stage, which was carried out between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, along with the results of the previous stage, Tamires also utilized validated questionnaires to assess symptoms of anxiety (Beck Anxiety Inventory), depression (Beck Depression Inventory) and risk of alcohol abuse (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – Concise [AUDIT-C]).

The questionnaires were answered by 382 students who, after the analysis of their responses, were separated into three groups. Group one: "under treatment for mental health" (147 people, 38.4%); group two: "not under treatment, but possibly in need for" (126 people, 32.9%); and group three: "under no treatment and with no need for" (109 people, 28.5%).

It was found that respondents with more intense depressive symptoms tend more easily to admit they need treatment, while respondents with anxiety symptoms and abusive alcohol consumption tend to neglect their need for treatment.

"We identified that in general people tend to be more aware of depressive symptoms when they notice a student is suffering. The more intense [the depressive symptom], the higher the acceptance of professional help," reports the researcher. "Something that is not so common in cases of anxiety symptoms, which tend to be neglected. If anxiety symptoms happened to be treated early, the patient would not get stressed for long periods and maybe the condition would not evolve to depression," says the researcher, concluding that groups which tend to admit the need for mental health treatment are usually formed by women, homosexuals or bisexuals.

Students with poor or deteriorated family bonds also tend to admit the need for professional help more frequently, while those who have good relationships – with family members or friends – tend to postpone the search for medical treatment. Furthermore, the isolation in an academic environment gets intensified in the presence of mental disorders.

University students who are overloaded because of the class tasks may undergo psychic suffering and feel discouraged to seek for treatment. "UFRGS' ranking for enrollment is an issue for many students, and something usually reported by them as a pressing requirement," says Tamires.

The researcher emphasizes that, even in the group that does not notice a need for treatment, the incidence of relevant symptoms was 20% for depression, 30% for anxiety, and 45% for moderate or severe risk of alcohol abuse.

## Change of scenery through assertive actions

One of the points highlighted by Tamires is that quotholder students are possibly affecting the data, since mental disorders seem to affect more frequently people who live in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability. The researcher points out that it is still necessary to carry out more in-depth research about this aspect to better understand the problems that affect this population portion. In addition, more assertive affirmative actions could be applied through the use of new data.

Another factor that appears in the research as a stressor is the preparation period for the university entrance exam. As Medicine is the most disputed undergraduate program by the students, the candidates need a much higher score in the entrance exams, which takes them to experience some years of high tension, pressure and a lot of hard work.

"Interventions need to be global, whether individual or in groups. Examples of individual actions include triage for mental disorders, support programs, financial support for treatment – already accessible at UFRGS, but restricted to a group of people whose monthly income does not exceed one minimum wage and half, and who are given R\$250(US\$52,08) per month for their treatment," says the psychiatrist. As for the group interventions, Tamires points out that there should be mentoring devoted to stimulate relationships of belonging and physical exercise practices.

The author of the research says that the educational institutions should rethink their evaluation methods, their curriculum frameworks and their course load. Finally, she emphasizes that it is necessary to prepare teachers to identify students who have depression symptoms.

Translated into English by **Paulina Da Costa Amaral**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training I (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (P.h.D.) – IL/UFRGS.

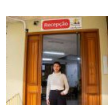
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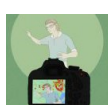
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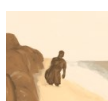
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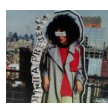
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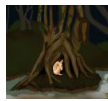
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