

The mental health of graduate students: A relevant issue in academic education

A saúde mental dos pós-graduandos: Um assunto relevante na formação acadêmica

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This editorial addresses a significant and topical issue in academia: the mental health of graduate students. In demanding contexts characterized by the search for excellence and pressure for productivity, it is essential to recognize the challenges faced by postgraduate students and the urgent need to promote their mental health and well-being.

Graduate education has a transformative potential for various sectors of society and can also promote opportunities for the emancipation of graduate students (Metcalfe et al., 2020). Graduate students and graduates play professional roles that are relevant in different social contexts. Research, innovation, and production coming from graduate studies influence policies, social practices, and interventions that can have an impact both in the context in which they are developed and in other regions and countries.

Academic activities require a wide range of competencies, skills, and attitudes that are developed as part of a complex process. Therefore, education should include ethics, respect for life, sustainability, and values that are in line with the needs of society (Ignatowicz et al., 2023).

A quality education and academic development experience can be positively or negatively affected by students' living conditions and health, including aspects directly related to their mental health. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have found a significant increase in symptoms related to mental disorders, especially anxiety and depression, among graduate students. A survey of higher education students in Portugal before and during the pandemic found a significant increase in anxiety, depression, and stress disorders (Maia & Dias, 2020). Studies in the United States and China have also shown an increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress among graduate students (Anwer et al., 2021; Towns et al., 2022). These symptoms can have a significant impact on students' personal, professional, and academic lives.

Although the needs related to psychological distress among graduate students are notable, comprehensive research and interventions on the impact of the pandemic on mental health do not seem to adequately address the needs of this population. During the pandemic, studies, interventions, and policies focused more on the biological aspects of the disease, and not much attention was paid to psychosocial aspects, which are equally important (Nabuco et al., 2020; Ornell et al., 2020).

Research on past epidemics, disasters, armed conflicts, and crises is scarce, and what we know from studying from these past tragedies is that mental health consequences, including mental and substance abuse disorders, can last longer and have a greater impact than the critical event itself (Galea et al., 2020; Nabuco et al., 2020). Therefore, it is critical to understand the current situation and plan effective interventions to avoid more severe and lasting effects of the pandemic.

It is important that graduate students feel encouraged to seek help when needed and to prioritize a healthy balance between their academic and personal lives. A study conducted among Brazilian graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that most of these students had psychological problems, including symptoms of anxiety and depression, but did not seek help from specialized professionals and

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Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia

How to cite this article: Miasso, A. I., & Vedana, K. G. (2024). A saúde mental dos pós-graduandos: Um assunto relevante na formação acadêmica. *Revista de Enfermagem Referência*, 6(4), e24ED2. <https://doi.org/10.12707/RVI24ED2>



consequently did not receive clinical diagnosis and therapeutic follow-up (Corrêa et al., 2022).

The mental health of graduate students can be influenced by risk or protective factors related to individual, relational, institutional, cultural, and historical-social aspects (Milicev et al., 2023). Considering these risk and protective factors related to academia, it is recommended that educational institutions define, implement, and assess strategies to promote the mental health and well-being of graduate students.

In response to the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic, the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), an entity linked to the Ministry of Education in Brazil, launched the “Impact of the Pandemic” call for proposals. One of the ongoing projects funded by this call focuses on mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of Brazilian graduate students. As part of this effort, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on mental health literacy will be made available to promote the well-being of graduate students enrolled in all graduate programs in Brazil, with the potential to be adapted for use in other countries.

A critical aspect identified was the high vulnerability of graduate students to suicide risk. In a study with 5,344 students, Molina et al. (2023) found that 31.5% of students presented some risk for suicide. Risk factors included non-heterosexual orientation, history of depression and post-traumatic stress, diagnosis of a common mental disorder, use of over-the-counter medication, use of antipsychotics, alcohol consumption, lack of health insurance, and dissatisfaction with life as a result of accessing social media networks. Higher income and religious affiliation were identified as protective factors.

Institutional mental health policies, academic representatives, and graduate programs must address psychological distress among university students. Investing in awareness campaigns and professional training can yield positive outcomes in the medium and long term. Inclusive practices, prevention campaigns, and communication technologies in mental health care can help promote the health of graduate students, with a focus on preventing problems (Wünsch et al., 2022).

Mental health care for graduate students is related to the quality of conditions in the academic environment. Thus, mental health care also implies political and social involvement in the defense of science, academia, and resistance to practices that could jeopardize education and the development of scientific knowledge.

Mental health care for graduate students must consider various issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and dignified living conditions. During their graduate studies, some students may face barriers or difficulties due to social or identity markers, such as gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, social class, territoriality, age, disability, and neurodiversity. It is therefore important to promote equity in graduate education by addressing the specific needs related to gender, race/color, ethnicity, and disability, among others (Milicev et al., 2023).

Studies on graduate students published in high-impact scientific journals have been developed mainly in countries with better conditions for rigorous scientific studies. Research, interventions, and policies must consider the disparities associated with the different cultural contexts in which graduate students are inserted, an aspect frequently overlooked in scientific literature.

Mental health care for graduate students requires a comprehensive and targeted approach. In addition to awareness-raising actions and professional training, institutional policies and graduate programs should take into account individual specificities, with special emphasis on diversity, equity, and socioeconomic conditions. Measures to promote well-being and reduce psychosocial risks among graduate students include implementing inclusive and innovative strategies, promoting equity, and developing multi-level and longitudinal preventive interventions. The academic community must work together to create a supportive environment for teaching and research, with the goal of promoting the mental health and success of all students and fostering a healthier and more inclusive academic life for all involved.

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