

TREATMENT FOR DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY AMONG ACADEMICS AND HEALTHCARE PROFESSORS AT A MIDWESTERN SANTA CATARINA UNIVERSITY

TRATAMENTO PARA DEPRESSÃO E ANSIEDADE ENTRE ACADÊMICOS E
PROFESSORES DA ÀREA DA SAÚDE DE UMA UNIVERSIDADE DO CENTRO-
OESTE DE SANTA CATARINA

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ABSTRACT: Anxiety and depression disorders can be classified as a group of conditions that cause serious harm to people's lives, affecting both their personal and social well-being. Psychotropic medications are the primary means of treatment for patients diagnosed with anxiety and depression. The university environment plays a significant role in the development of individuals. However, because it requires a high level of dedication and study, it can be considered a stressful process that impacts the physical and mental health of both students and teachers. This research aimed to evaluate the mental health of students and professors in the health field, as well as their use of anxiolytics and antidepressants. It is an applied research study, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches with



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an exploratory objective, conducted through the application of a questionnaire for data collection. Among the research participants, 90.4% (288) were students, and 9.4% (30) were professors in the health field at the educational institution studied. The research sample primarily consists of female individuals (78.9%), predominantly single (72.2%), aged 18 to 23 years (50%), without children (82.3%), and residing with their family (66%). Of these, 50.6% (161) reported using medication for anxiety and/or depression. The majority reported that the medication was indicated for anxiety (55%, 147), followed by depression (30%, 81), insomnia (7%, 17), premenstrual syndrome (3%, 8), and other indications (5%, 13). In conclusion, the mental health of the research participants is affected. Given the above, it is necessary to develop an action plan to find solutions and promote mental health care, aiming to prevent an increase in the prevalence of mental disorders in universities.

KEYWORDS: Mental disorder. University environment. Psychotropics.

RESUMO: Os transtornos de ansiedade e depressão podem ser classificados como um grupo de condições que causam sérios danos à vida das pessoas, afetando tanto o seu bem-estar pessoal quanto social. Medicamentos psicotrópicos são o principal meio de tratamento para pacientes diagnosticados com ansiedade e depressão. O ambiente universitário desempenha um papel significativo no desenvolvimento dos indivíduos. No entanto, por exigir um alto nível de dedicação e estudo, pode ser considerado um processo estressante que impacta a saúde física e mental de estudantes e professores. Esta pesquisa teve como objetivo avaliar a saúde mental de alunos e professores na área da saúde, bem como o uso de ansiolíticos e antidepressivos. Trata-se de uma pesquisa aplicada, que combina abordagens qualitativas e quantitativas com um objetivo exploratório, realizada através da aplicação de um questionário para coleta de dados. Entre os participantes da pesquisa, 90,4% (288) eram alunos e 9,4% (30) eram professores na área da saúde da instituição de ensino estudada. A amostra da pesquisa é composta majoritariamente por indivíduos do sexo feminino (78,9%), predominantemente solteiros (72,2%), com idade entre 18 e 23 anos (50%), sem filhos (82,3%) e residindo com a família (66%). Destes, 50,6% (161) relataram o uso de medicamentos para ansiedade e/ou depressão. A maioria relatou que o medicamento foi indicado para ansiedade (55%, 147), seguido de depressão (30%, 81), insônia (7%, 17), síndrome pré-menstrual (3%, 8) e outras indicações (5%, 13). Em conclusão, a saúde mental dos participantes da pesquisa é afetada. Diante do exposto, é necessário desenvolver um plano de ação para encontrar soluções e promover cuidados com a saúde mental, visando prevenir o aumento da prevalência de transtornos mentais nas universidades.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Transtorno mental. Ambiente universitário. Psicotrópicos.

Introduction

Issues such as anxiety and depression fall into a group of conditions that cause serious harm to an individual's life, affecting those around them as well. Anxiety and depressive disorders place a significant burden on people's lives, resulting in a public health problem. Anxiety symptoms include fatigue, chest pain, sleep disturbances, and palpitations, which can cause suffering and impairment in social, professional, and academic settings. Depression, on the other hand, impacts a person's mental, physical, and emotional health, causing deep sadness, mood changes, feelings of pain and guilt, and increased or decreased appetite. It is worth noting

that depression can be triggered by various factors such as hormonal changes, family loss, or medication use. Moreover, depression can affect university students due to changes in their routines (Lelis *et al.*, 2020).

Antidepressant medications are used for the treatment of depression. These medications increase monoamine neurotransmission through various mechanisms, with the most common being the inhibition of the serotonin transporter, the norepinephrine transporter, or both. This category also includes tricyclic antidepressants (Brito *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, anxiolytics are psychotropic or psychoactive drugs that act on the central nervous system (CNS), inducing changes in behavior, mood, and cognition. They are used for various conditions, such as depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, and social problems, among others. Prolonged use can lead to dependence and tolerance, which are related to the interaction between dosage, duration of treatment, frequency of use, and the patient's mental health (Silva *et al.*, 2021).

It should be noted that psychotropic medications are the primary means of treatment for patients diagnosed with anxiety and depression, although there are non-pharmacological methods or natural measures, such as herbal medications, which are also effective. Psychotropics are often the first choice due to their diverse therapeutic effects (Souza *et al.*, 2021).

Higher education plays a crucial role in personal development by expanding skills and fostering new personal and professional abilities, and can be considered a source of positive outcomes for students. However, it requires a high level of dedication and study, making it a period marked by changes in a person's lifestyle. This process can become stressful and impact students' physical and mental health, potentially leading to anxiety and/or depression (Ariño; Bardagi, 2018).

In this same context, professors are also affected, as teaching is considered one of the most challenging professions, often exposing them to environments filled with conflict and stress, including the high demand for good results (Silva; Carvalho, 2016), they are also subject to stressful episodes, which can affect their physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Baptista *et al.*, 2019). Studies indicate that teachers experiencing depression can make educational practices burdensome, which negatively impacts students' lives. Therefore, improving teachers' quality of life and developing a preventive plan with professionals can help reduce rates of depression and anxiety among them (Silva; Carvalho, 2016).

Given the reality faced by academics and professors in the health field, these individuals are at risk of developing anxiety and depression, often necessitating the use of anxiolytics and antidepressants. The objective of the study presented here was to evaluate the mental health of academics and professors in the health area at a university in Midwest-SC through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The aim was to provide insights that can inform future action plans to prevent an increase in the prevalence of depression in academic life. Consequently, it is essential to address the use of psychotropic medications for effective treatment.

Materials and Methods

The present study employed applied research methods, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches with an exploratory objective. Data collection utilized a validated questionnaire (Coimbra et al., 2021) and targeted a sample of approximately 318 participants from Universidade Alto Vale do Rio do Peixe (UNIARP). The study received approval from the Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 5,731,238), and participation was contingent upon respondents signing a free and informed consent form (TCLE).

The questionnaire comprised seven questions addressing various aspects, including gender, institutional affiliation, initiation of treatment, indications for use, and utilization of alternative therapies. It was administered virtually via Google Forms, incorporating both open and closed questions to evaluate mental health and the use of anxiolytic and antidepressant medications among students and faculty in the health field. The data collection period was from September 23, 2022, to October 7, 2022.

For the quantitative analysis, dynamic graphs were generated using Prism GraphPad version 5.0, and the percentage distribution of key data points was calculated. Additionally, the study aims to provide insights into the prevalence and patterns of alternative therapy use among the target population, contributing valuable information to the understanding of mental health management in academic settings.

Results and discussion

The research involved a total of 318 participants, of whom 164 (50.6%) use anxiolytics and/or antidepressants. Coimbra *et al.* (2021) found that 16% of nursing students use some type of anxiolytic and/or antidepressant. Another study by Neri et al. (2020) reported a prevalence of 22.3% in the use of medication for anxiety and/or depression among university students.

According to Cavestro and Rocha (2006), it is estimated that 15% to 25% of students experience disorders such as depression and anxiety during their academic training. Depressive disorders are increasingly prominent in society and do not discriminate by age, gender, socioeconomic status, or cultural class, posing serious public health problems. These disorders can lead to psychological suffering and negatively impact an individual's quality of life, social functioning, and productivity (Vieira & Coutinho, 2008).

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that, at some point in life, an individual will be affected by depression. This prevalence is 17% in adulthood, and it can occur in childhood or old age. Depression may be episodic or chronic, comparable to conditions like diabetes or heart failure, due to the significant impact it can have on people's lives (Vieira & Coutinho, 2008).

The research sample is predominantly composed of female individuals (78.9%), single (72.2%), aged between 18 and 23 years old (50%), without children (82.3%), and living with their family (66%), as shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the profile of the female sample. Studies indicate that women are the primary users of medications, particularly antidepressants. Several factors contribute to this trend, including the higher representation of women in

health-related courses. Additionally, hormonal and behavioral disorders in females can affect the degradation, production, and reuptake of neurotransmitters, especially serotonin, which is associated with well-being. These factors may contribute to a higher prevalence of depression among women (Bandeira *et al.*, 2016).

Of the participants, 90.4% (288) are students and 9.4% (30) are professors in the health area of the educational institution, as shown in Figure 1. Among the 288 students and 30 professors who participated in the survey, 150 students and 14 professors use anxiolytics and/or antidepressants. Research conducted by Souza and Filho (2010) found that the primary cause of anxiety in teachers is high stress. In their study of 49 participants, 30 used anxiolytics, citing stress-induced anxiety as the main reason, followed by emotional factors, which accounted for 57.2%.

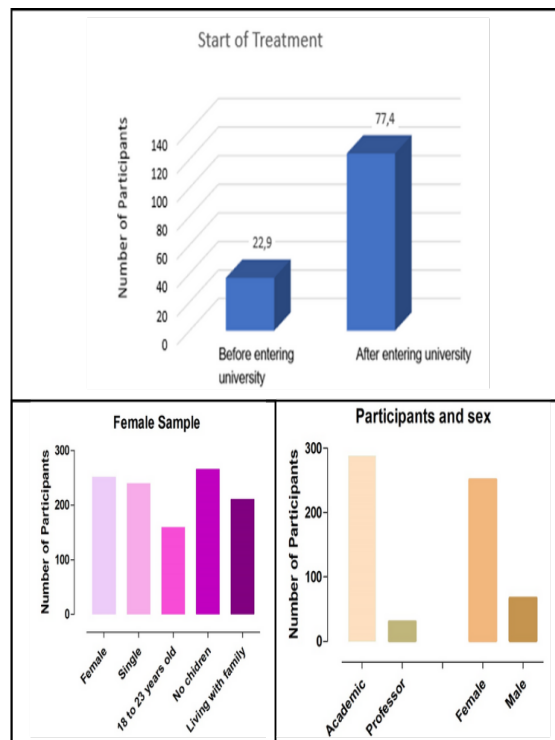
Silva and Carvalho (2016) identify working conditions and professional devaluation as major factors leading to depression among university professors. Other stressors include excessive workload, dissatisfaction with infrastructure, lack of teaching materials and equipment, and publication fees (Silva & Carvalho, 2016). According to Gouveia (2010), university professors face daily pressures to publish scientific articles, participate in events, and achieve good results, which can contribute to the development of depression. Epidemiological studies indicate a 16.8% prevalence of depression among university professors (Silva & Carvalho, 2016).

Regarding the onset of treatment, 77.4% (127) of the participants reported starting their medication after entering the university, while 22.6% (37) reported using it before starting university, as shown in Figure 1. Significant changes occur when students begin university, such as changes in routine, increased study hours, possible geographical distance from family, and pressures from society, the institution, family, and themselves, leading to often negative feelings (Fernandes, 2018). This may explain the high number of participants who began using antidepressants or anxiolytics after starting university. Studies suggest that during academic training, 15 to 25% of students may experience some type of psychological disorder, particularly those in the health field (Neri, 2020).

Given the complexity surrounding teaching work, it is evident that teachers are particularly vulnerable to psychological disorders. Therefore, it is crucial to exercise caution (Soares, 2017). Tavares *et al.* (2022) found in their research that 78% of participants began their treatment after entering university. Studies identify several triggers for depression and/or anxiety at the start of academic life, including changes, heavy workload, and the need to assimilate a large amount of information. As a result, students often experience mental health issues that can negatively impact their quality of life. Individuals with compromised mental health may experience reduced productivity, affecting their academic performance, work, and other daily responsibilities (Tavares *et al.*, 2022).

The consumption of antidepressants and/or anxiolytics has been rising due to an increase in mental health diagnoses, the introduction of new medications, and emerging therapeutic indications (Pereira, 2018).

Figure 1 – Onset of Treatment Before and After Entering University: Profile of Female Participants and Gender Distribution



Source: The authors (2024).

Of the participants who use anxiolytics and/or antidepressants, 51% (164) reported using escitalopram, making it the most commonly used medication. This was followed by fluoxetine (25%, 43), sertraline (18%, 31), bupropion (12%, 19), citalopram (5%, 8), and other psychotropics (21%, 34). As shown in Figure 2, Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are the most consumed class of antidepressants for treating anxiety and/or depression. SSRIs are favored for their selective action, more tolerable profile, and lower incidence of side effects (Pereira, 2018). A bibliographic review by Marinho, Nascimento, and Nicoletti (2019) indicates that SSRIs are the most frequently prescribed class across all analyzed studies, likely due to their relatively low side effect profile and their newer status compared to other classes.

Regarding the prescriber, the majority were general practitioners (44%, 73), followed by psychiatrists (40%, 66), neurologists (9%, 15), endocrinologists (3%, 5), gynecologists (2%, 4), and allergists and otorhinolaryngologists (1% each, 1). This distribution is illustrated in Figure 2. Reis, Matos, and Melo (2017) found similar results in their research conducted over two periods, with general practitioners being the main prescribers of psychotropic drugs (72.92% and 81.59% in the first and second periods, respectively), followed by psychiatrists (23.69% and 10.45% in the first and second periods, respectively).

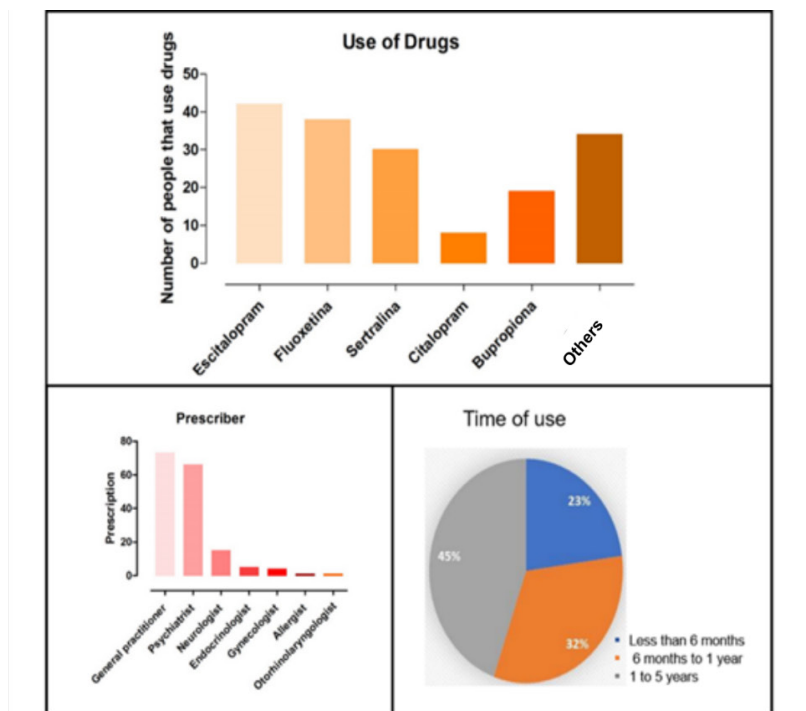
Another study found that most prescriptions were issued by general practitioners (51.4%), followed by endocrinologists (27.3%), psychiatrists (13.9%), gynecologists (4.5%), and neurologists (2.5%) (Andrade et al., 2004). Torres et al. (2014) reported that general practitioners (20.53%) and neurologists (10.8%) were the most frequent prescribers, followed by gynecologists (8.93%) and psychiatrists (7.10%), which aligns with the findings of the present

study. Additionally, Tavares (2022) found that 67.0% of individuals reported being referred by a psychiatrist.

The vast majority of participants reported that their medication was prescribed for anxiety (55%, 147), followed by depression (30%, 81), insomnia (7%, 17), premenstrual syndrome (PMS) (3%, 8), and other indications (5%, 13). It is important to note that respondents could select more than one option for this question. Coimbra et al. (2021) found similar results in their research, with anxiety being the primary indication for drug use (61.54%), followed by depression (30.77%). A study by Fávero, Sato, and Santiago (2018) identified insomnia (62.5%), depression (53.1%), and anxiety (43.8%) as the main reasons for medication use. Rosa et al. (2012) reported that the most common indications were depression (48.2%, n = 67), anxiety (43.9%, n = 61), and insomnia (36.7%, n = 51).

With regard to the time of use, 45% of the participants (78) reported using it for 1 to 5 years; 32% (57), 6 months to 1 year; and 23% (40), less than 6 months (Figure 2). A similar response found reports that most research participants use medications for a period of one to five years (37.3%) (Tavares *et al.*, 2022).

Figure 2 – Most Commonly Used Drugs in Treatment, Prescriber’s Specialty, and Duration of Medication Use Among Research Participants



Source: The authors (2024).

With regard to alternative treatments, most participants reported using individual therapy (96), followed by acupuncture (28), phytotherapy (26), homeopathy (16), auriculotherapy (6), group therapy (3), and other Complementary and Integrative Practices (PICs) (9), as shown in Figure 3.

It is important to note that 26 patients reported using herbal medicine to alleviate symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. However, studies indicate that various herbal remedies

may interact with synthetic medications, potentially posing health risks (Czige *et al.*, 2023; Rombolà *et al.*, 2020).

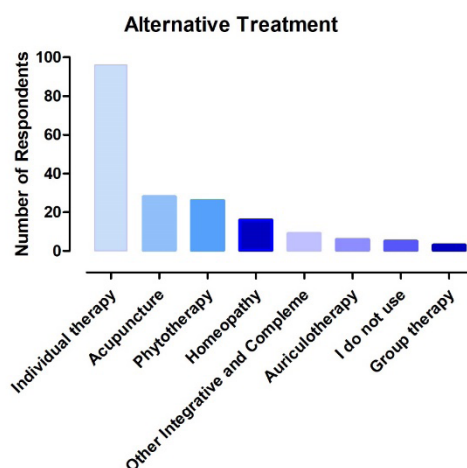
Studies highlight the effectiveness of treating anxiety with ear acupuncture among university students during exam periods, contributing to improved academic performance (Belasco *et al.*, 2019). Acupuncture aims to restore the energy balance of the organs to maintain harmony in the body. It does not promise miraculous cures or complete resolution of pathologies but offers gradual symptom relief for anxiety and/or depression (Armour *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, a study by Girão (2014) involving 15 women treated with acupuncture demonstrated improvements in anxiety and depression, suggesting that this technique can be a valuable complement to traditional treatments for anxiety.

The use of medicinal plants for therapeutic purposes in the treatment of depression and/or anxiety appears to be a viable option, as they generally have fewer adverse effects compared to traditional medications (Nóbrega *et al.*, 2022). Therapeutic properties are present in several plant species, and their use in treating individuals with irregular mental health has yielded positive results (Bortoluzzi, Schmitt, & Mazur, 2020). According to Carvalho, Leite, and Costa (2021), the use of medicinal plants for treating anxiety and/or depression has been growing worldwide, as these plants offer comparable effectiveness to conventional medications while posing a lower risk of adverse effects.

Homeopathic treatment has been shown to be effective and to have fewer side effects compared to traditional treatments for depression. A study compared three groups of patients: the first group received both antidepressants and a homeopathic complex; the second group received only antidepressant medication; and the third group received only the homeopathic complex. The results indicated that while the allopathic treatment was associated with unwanted side effects, the homeopathic treatment did not present any adverse effects (Lopes *et al.*, 2019).

However, it is important to recognize that, despite the beneficial results of alternative practices, they do not replace traditional medicine (Morta, 2024). They should be viewed as complementary, helping to improve symptoms rather than serving as complete substitutes. It is recommended that healthcare professionals seek to understand patients' motivations for using alternative therapies and the potential benefits of this growing trend (Ogbu *et al.*, 2023).

Figure 3 – Alternative treatment



Source: The authors (2024).

Conclusion

The academic environment imposes significant demands on both professors and students. In this context, life changes, new demands, adaptation to a new reality, and the need to manage time between studies, exams, and leisure can generate feelings of helplessness and stress. For professors, the responsibility of delivering constantly updated and new knowledge, the overload of tasks, grading assignments, meeting university requirements, publications, and research, as well as long hours of study, make the routine exhausting and contribute to the emergence of mental disorders such as anxiety and/or depression.

The objective of this study was to assess the mental health of students and faculty, as well as the use of anxiolytics and/or antidepressants. The results revealed that more than half of the participants use these medications to treat anxiety and depression. Among the most common medications are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), with escitalopram being the most widely used, followed by fluoxetine and sertraline.

Given this scenario, it is crucial to develop an action plan and promote further studies on the topic to find solutions and enhance mental health care. In the academic environment, several actions can be implemented to improve the situation. It is essential to provide accessible counseling and psychological support services for both students and professors. Additionally, organizing events and activities aimed at stress reduction, such as time management workshops, can be beneficial.

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