




THE MENTAL HEALTH OF NURSING PROFESSIONALS IN THE INTRA-HOSPITAL ENVIRONMENT

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/levv15n43-065>

Submitted on: 19/11/2024

Publication date: 19/12/2024

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ABSTRACT

The mental health of nursing professionals in hospital environments is a topic of increasing relevance due to adverse working conditions, emotional overload and constant pressure. This study aims to investigate the factors that influence the mental illness of nurses and the strategies proposed to mitigate these impacts. A systematic integrative review of the literature was carried out in databases such as PubMed, SciELO, LILACS, and Google Scholar, covering publications between 2010 and 2024. The descriptors used included "mental health", "hospital nursing", "burnout syndrome" and "mental disorders". The inclusion criteria selected studies in Portuguese and English that specifically addressed the topic of mental health of nurses in hospitals. The results point to the high prevalence of disorders such as anxiety, depression and Burnout syndrome, especially nurses who work in Intensive Care Units (ICU) and emergency sectors, due to the emotional and physical load. Lack of organizational support and work overload were identified as the main risk factors for mental illness. Psychological support policies, stress management programs and improvements in working conditions are some of the proposed interventions. It is concluded that, despite the existing initiatives, the policies aimed at the mental health of nurses are still insufficient, and it is necessary to expand preventive actions and continuous support for these professionals, promoting healthier and safer work environments.

Keywords: Nursing. Mental health. Burnout Syndrome. Occupational Stress.

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INTRODUCTION

Nursing is one of the most essential professions within the health system, being responsible for much of the direct care provided to patients. However, the practice of nursing, especially in hospital settings, exposes professionals to a variety of physical, emotional, and psychological challenges that have significant impacts on their mental health (BARROS et al., 2021; BRILHANTE et al., 2022). The growing complexity of work demands, associated with emotional overload, precarious working conditions and continuous exposure to human suffering, makes nursing a profession with high rates of mental illness, which directly reflects on the quality of care provided (MACHADO et al., 2014; ALVES, 2011).

Several studies indicate that mental and behavioral disorders among nurses are becoming an alarming concern in the public health scenario. Occupational diseases, such as Burnout syndrome, chronic stress and anxiety disorders, are frequently reported by nursing professionals, especially those who work in high-pressure environments, such as intensive care units (ICU) and emergency sectors (FERREIRA; ARAGON; OLIVEIRA, 2017; ANDRADE, PINTO and RABELO, 2019). According to Barros et al. (2021), factors such as excessive workload, accumulation of functions, low remuneration, and constant exposure to critical situations aggravate the risk of physical and psychological exhaustion, impacting the mental health of these professionals in a devastating way.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased the levels of stress and emotional distress among nurses, who found themselves on the front line of the fight against the pandemic, dealing not only with the high demand for work, but also with the constant fear of contamination and the loss of colleagues and patients (BRILHANTE et al., 2022; HUMEREZ, OHL and SILVA, 2020). The pandemic scenario brought to light the psychological vulnerability of these professionals and evidenced the lack of adequate emotional and psychological support in health institutions, reinforcing the urgency of policies aimed at the mental health of the nursing team (GOMES; VARGAS, 2023).

Studies conducted before the pandemic already indicated that nurses face significant challenges in maintaining their mental health in the midst of exhausting working hours and adverse working conditions (ALVES, 2011). However, the arrival of the pandemic has exacerbated these problems, leading to a significant increase in cases of depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders, as observed by several authors (FERREIRA et al., 2020; GOMES et al., 2022). According to ALMEIDA; VIEIRA AND GOUVEIA, 2016, the literature points to the urgent need for strategies to promote mental health and the adoption

of preventive measures that can minimize the psychological impacts caused by the practice of nursing in hospital environments.

In this context, the present research seeks to investigate the mental health of nursing professionals who work in hospital environments, with emphasis on the analysis of organizational, social and individual factors that influence the mental illness of these workers. The literature review shows that the main risk factors include work overload, accumulation of functions, unhealthy working conditions, and emotional exhaustion associated with the care of patients in critical conditions (FERREIRA, ARAGÃO, and OLIVEIRA, 2017; GOMES; SILVA; GIOVANINI, 2017). In addition, the use of psychoactive substances by nurses as a way to deal with occupational stress is a phenomenon that also deserves to be highlighted, evidencing the seriousness of the situation and the need for more effective measures to promote mental health in the workplace (ANDRADE; DICK; RABELO, 2019).

The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to deepening the understanding of the factors that lead to mental illness among nurses and in proposing strategies that can improve both the quality of life of professionals and patient safety. By discussing the mental health conditions of the nursing team, it is expected to provide subsidies for the formulation of public policies and the implementation of work practices that promote healthier and safer work environments for these professionals (LOPES et al., 2023). The research is also aligned with the need to rethink hospital management strategies, especially with regard to emotional support and the workload of nurses, pointing to the importance of interventions aimed at preventing occupational stress and promoting psychological well-being (FERREIRA et al., 2016; BAPTISTA et al., 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as a systematic integrative review of the literature, with the objective of identifying, analyzing and synthesizing the available data on the mental health of nursing professionals in the hospital context, especially with regard to factors that influence mental illness, such as work overload, stress and burnout syndrome. The integrative review allows the gathering of empirical and theoretical research results, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject (SOUSA; SILVA; CARVALHO, 2010).

The inclusion criteria used were: Articles published between 2010 and 2024; publications in Portuguese and English; empirical studies and literature reviews that deal with the mental health of nurses, focused on mental disorders, occupational stress, burnout

syndrome and coping strategies in the hospital environment. The following articles were excluded: articles outside the delimited period; studies that addressed only other health professionals without specifying the context of nursing; reviews without a mental health approach.

The search was carried out in the *PubMed*, *SciELO*, *LILACS*, *MedLine* and *Google Scholar* databases, using the following descriptors: "mental health", "hospital nursing", "burnout syndrome", "mental disorders", "occupational stress" and "working conditions in nursing". In addition to the descriptors in Portuguese, the equivalents in English were used to expand the scope of the research.

The selection of studies was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, articles were selected based on the reading of titles and abstracts, according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In the second phase, the selected articles were read in full, in order to assess their relevance to the research and ensure adherence to the theme.

The selected articles were organized in a synthesis matrix that included the following information: author, year of publication, study objective, methodology, main results, factors related to mental illness and proposed interventions. Data analysis was conducted using the thematic categorization technique, grouping the common factors that emerged in the different studies.

The results were summarized in a descriptive way, addressing the main risk factors for mental illness in nurses, with emphasis on working conditions, workload, and organizational support. Additionally, a critical analysis of existing mental health policies and gaps found in the mental health care of nursing professionals was carried out.

As this was a literature review, it was not necessary to have the direct involvement of participants, so the approval of a research ethics committee was not required. However, all selected articles followed ethical criteria in their respective primary research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mental health of nursing professionals in Brazil has been widely discussed in the literature due to the high rate of mental illness associated with the hospital environment. The results indicate that the prevalence of mental disorders among nursing professionals working in hospitals is alarming and reflects a scenario of mental health fragility in this group, which has been widely studied in recent years. Daily exposure to high-stress situations, added to emotional and physical demands, results in a work environment that favors the development of conditions such as anxiety, depression, stress, and Burnout syndrome.

In all the studies analyzed, the main factors that contribute to nurses' mental illness include work overload, constant emotional pressure, lack of organizational support, and unhealthy working conditions (BARROS et al., 2021; BRILHANTE et al., 2022). These factors are recurrent in the different categories of nursing professionals, whether technicians, assistants, or graduate nurses, regardless of the unit in which they work, especially in the urgent and emergency sectors and Intensive Care Units (ICU), where the pressure is more exacerbated (GOMES and VARGAS, 2023; GOMES, SILVA and GIOVANINI, 2017).

Occupational stress is a constant in studies, with results that demonstrate that most nursing professionals show signs of mental and physical exhaustion. The study by Alves (2011) highlights that nursing work is marked by long hours, low pay and the need for multiple employment contracts, which intensifies vulnerability to stress. Similarly, Ferreira, Aragão and Oliveira (2017) point out that Burnout syndrome is common among nurses who work in high-pressure environments, such as ICUs, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low professional achievement.

The results of Ferreira et al. (2020) reveal that work overload is one of the biggest aggravating factors of mental health, leading many professionals to exhaustion. According to these authors, strenuous working hours and the accumulation of functions hinder emotional recovery, which, in turn, contributes to the increase in disorders such as depression and anxiety.

According to a study by Perniciotti et al. (2020), the constant work overload and the scarcity of adequate resources in hospitals lead nurses to develop high levels of stress. These factors, associated with the lack of institutional support, result in symptoms related to the Burnout syndrome, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal fulfillment at work. The study revealed that the prevalence of burnout is especially high in nurses who work in emergency and intensive care units, where emotional pressure is extreme.

Araújo et al. (2022) reinforce this issue by highlighting that precarious working conditions, combined with the lack of adequate psychological support, increases the prevalence of mental disorders, especially depression and anxiety. These disorders are widely reported by nursing professionals who, in addition to dealing with the scarcity of resources and the high workload, face the expectation of providing humanized and efficient care, which often becomes impossible due to the adverse conditions of the hospital environment. Teixeira et al. (2020) demonstrate that the pressure to deal with emergency and urgent situations, the lack of adequate infrastructure, and the reduced number of

professionals significantly increase the risk of developing anxiety disorders among nurses. These factors are often aggravated by the difficulty in accessing psychological support and the lack of care policies aimed at the mental health of health professionals, creating a vicious cycle of mental exhaustion.

Other factors that contribute to the high prevalence of mental disorders among nurses include long working hours and direct contact with patients in situations of suffering, death and pain. As pointed out by Soares et al. (2022), this scenario is exacerbated in periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the demand for health services increased dramatically. During the pandemic, many nurses reported high levels of stress and anxiety, due to exposure to the virus, work overload, and lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

The discussion about nurses' mental health also points to the need for structured interventions in the work environment. Costa and Gouvea (2022) and Ribeiro and Cahú (2024) suggest that emotional support policies and stress management programs should be implemented as priority strategies for promoting nurses' well-being. The creation of spaces for emotional decompression, the provision of continuous psychological support, and the improvement of working conditions are essential measures to mitigate the negative effects of work overload on the mental health of these professionals.

Studies such as those by Brilhante et al. (2022) and Humerez, Ohi and Silva (2020) highlight that the pandemic intensified stress and fear among nursing professionals, who began to deal not only with the risk of contamination, but also with work overload and the constant death of patients and colleagues. Barros et al. (2021) point out that the COVID-19 pandemic placed nurses in a critical situation of emotional exposure, which led to an increase in cases of Burnout, anxiety, and depression.

According to Machado et al. (2014), musculoskeletal symptoms, such as leg and back pain, are also added to mental suffering, showing that the illness of nursing professionals is multifactorial. This is aggravated by the pandemic, which has further increased the physical and emotional demands on these workers.

The results vary depending on the sector in which the nurse practitioners work. The studies by Gomes and Vargas (2023) and Barros et al. (2021) focus specifically on professionals working in emergency units and ICUs, where the emotional load is more intense due to the critical nature of the work. In these units, nurses deal with life-or-death situations on a daily basis, which increases the risk of mental burnout. These professionals tend to develop stress and anxiety disorders more frequently compared to those who work in other hospital areas.

On the other hand, nursing technicians, analyzed by Brilhante et al. (2022), also face high levels of stress, especially in public hospitals, where working conditions are more precarious. These professionals, although often not directly involved in intensive care decision-making, suffer from work overload, low pay, and lack of psychological support.

The high prevalence of psychic disorders, such as stress, depression and anxiety, is also closely related to the emotional pressure to which nurses are subjected on a daily basis. Salomé, Martins and Espósito (2009) highlight that nursing professionals often face situations of high physical and emotional demand, such as medical emergencies and constant contact with the pain and suffering of patients. These conditions, exacerbated by the lack of institutional and psychological support, have a direct impact on the mental health of nurses, resulting in a higher incidence of psychic disorders.

A relevant point highlighted by Andrade, Pinto and Rabelo (2019) is the use of psychoactive substances by nurses as a strategy to deal with occupational stress. These authors point out that the easy access to medications in the hospital environment, combined with the adverse working conditions, leads many professionals to resort to the use of psychotropic drugs to withstand the daily pressure. This practice aggravates the mental health problem, generating a cycle of chemical dependence and illness.

Studies indicate that, although there is a growing recognition of the impacts of mental health among nursing professionals, mental health policies in Brazil are still insufficient to deal with the severity of the problem. The Federal Council of Nursing (COFEN) implemented some psychological support initiatives, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (HUMEREZ; OHL; SILVA, 2020). However, these programs are largely palliative and do not address the structural causes of occupational stress, such as work overload, precarious working conditions, and lack of organizational resources to provide ongoing support.

The results of this study point to the urgent need for interventions that promote the mental health of nurses in a hospital environment. The implementation of emotional support policies, the improvement of working conditions, and continuous access to stress management programs are fundamental steps to reduce the prevalence of mental disorders among these professionals and improve the quality of hospital care.

The National Health Promotion Policy (PNPS), revised in 2017, recognizes the importance of creating healthy work environments, and encourages the implementation of actions aimed at the mental health of workers, including the prevention of occupational diseases such as stress and physical and emotional exhaustion (Brasil, 2014). In addition, the National Program for Comprehensive Attention to Workers' Health (PNAIST), which is

also part of the SUS, includes guidelines for the health of health workers, but its specific application in high-complexity hospital units, where stress levels are higher, is still limited. Policies such as PNAIST could be strengthened with specific psychological support and burnout prevention programs aimed at nurses. The research by Alves et al. (2024) highlights that these professionals, working on the front line of covid-19 in urgent, emergency, and intensive care services, face especially adverse working conditions in intensive care units and emergencies, which demands more targeted attention from public policies.

In Brazil, mental health policies for health workers are provided for in documents and regulations, such as the National Mental Health Policy (PNSM), which is part of the Unified Health System (SUS). This policy establishes general guidelines for the promotion, prevention and care of mental health, covering the general population and, indirectly, health professionals. However, these guidelines are broad and often do not specifically contemplate the demands of the hospital environment and nursing professionals (Mexko; Benelli, 2022).

Despite existing policies, such as the Mental Health Nursing Care project implemented during the pandemic (HUMEREZ, OHL and SILVA, 2020), studies indicate that a broader and more effective reformulation of mental health policies aimed at nurses is needed. Current initiatives tend to focus on reactive interventions, when illness has already manifested, rather than promoting prevention and improvement of working conditions that could reduce rates of mental illness. Lopes et al. (2023) emphasize that it is essential that these policies are preventive and that they integrate continuous emotional support programs for health professionals.

In addition, the results suggest that policies should include structural measures, such as reducing the workload, hiring more professionals to share the functions, improving working conditions and increasing remuneration as ways to relieve psychological pressure on nursing professionals. The studies by Sousa et al. (2023) demonstrate that the implementation of wellness and professional appreciation programs can be an effective solution to mitigate stress and emotional overload, improving both the mental health of professionals and the quality of patient care.

Another important point is that, although labor legislation provides for the mandatory nature of periodic health exams for professionals exposed to risks, such as nurses, these exams often do not include in-depth mental health evaluations. The lack of an integrated approach aimed at emotional well-being aggravates the situation, leading to mental illness that is not diagnosed or treated late. Ribeiro and Cahú0 (2024) highlight that many nurses



are reluctant to seek help due to the stigma associated with mental disorders, which is another aspect that public policies should address with awareness campaigns.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The comparative analysis of the studies shows that mental health problems among nursing professionals in Brazil are directly related to working conditions and the emotional overload imposed by health institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified these challenges, exposing the psychological vulnerability of nurses and the insufficiency of mental health policies currently in place. The recognition of the factors that contribute to mental illness and the implementation of more effective policies, which focus on both prevention and continuous support for professionals, are fundamental for the promotion of a healthier and safer work environment.

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