



DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY AMONG HEALTH PROFESSIONALS: FACTORS, IMPLICATIONS AND COPING STRATEGIES



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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate the factors that contribute to the development of depression and anxiety among health professionals, analyze their implications in professional practice and identify effective coping strategies. Carried out with a qualitative exploratory approach, it had a sample of 15 health professionals, whose data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by discourse analysis. The results revealed that factors such as work overload, lack of institutional support, and stigma in relation to seeking psychological help are among the main triggers of these disorders, which negatively impact the quality of care, increase the risks of clinical errors, and affect the personal lives of workers. Coping strategies such as therapy, physical exercise, and mindfulness were mentioned as effective, although the use of less adaptive mechanisms was also reported. The research concluded that coping with depression and anxiety among these professionals requires an integrated approach, involving institutional measures, public policies and individual practices to promote a healthier work environment and ensure the quality of the services provided.

Keywords: Anxiety. Depression. Health. Coping. Welfare.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health has been widely recognized as an essential aspect of well-being and quality of life. However, paradoxically, health professionals, who are responsible for promoting and caring for the health of others, face significant challenges related to their own mental health. Depression and anxiety stand out as the most prevalent conditions among these workers, reflecting a worrying reality in the professional environment (Perniciotti et al., 2020).

Factors such as the high workload, the pressure for quick and assertive decisions, and the constant contact with the suffering of others contribute to the psychological vulnerability of these professionals. In addition, prolonged shifts and the lack of emotional support in the workplace can aggravate this situation. These aspects create a scenario in which mental health is often neglected or secondary.

The implications of depression and anxiety among health professionals transcend the individual sphere. These disorders can negatively impact the quality of care offered to patients, increase the risk of clinical errors, and compromise the effectiveness of health teams. In addition, the persistence of these conditions can lead to absence from work, generating overload for other team members and increasing institutional costs (Pêgo; Pêgo, 2016; Opoku et al., 2021).

It is relevant to highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges. During this period, many professionals faced exhausting hours, dealt with the scarcity of resources and faced grief over the loss of colleagues and patients. These conditions intensified stress levels, increasing the incidence of mental disorders in professionals in different areas of health (Patel, 2023).

Coping strategies, known as coping strategies, have been shown to be key to mitigating the negative effects of depression and anxiety. These strategies may include social support, mindfulness practices, psychotherapy, and organizational programs that prioritize the well-being of workers. However, not all professionals have access to these resources, which highlights the need for broader and more accessible interventions (Lima; Domingues Junior; Silva, 2024; Maslach; Leiter, 2016).

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of mental health in the workplace, many professionals still face barriers to seeking help, such as the stigma associated with mental disorders and lack of time. These barriers reinforce the need to promote a culture of care that normalizes the search for support and prioritizes the psychological health of health workers (Lima; Domingues Junior; Gomes, 2023).

Given this scenario, the objective of this research is to understand the factors that contribute to the development of depression and anxiety among health professionals, to analyze the implications of these disorders in professional practice and to identify effective coping strategies that can be implemented to minimize their impacts.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted with an exploratory qualitative approach, allowing an in-depth and detailed understanding of the experiences and perceptions of health professionals in relation to depression, anxiety, and coping strategies. The qualitative method was chosen for its ability to capture the nuances and complexity of phenomena related to mental health in the professional context (Lima; Domingues Junior; Gomes, 2023; File; Domingues Junior; Silva, 2024; File; Silva; Domingues Júnior, 2024).

The sample consisted of 15 health professionals, including physicians, nurses, psychologists and nursing technicians. The selection was carried out intentionally, seeking to include individuals with diverse experiences in facing challenges related to mental health in work environments. Participants were invited to collaborate voluntarily, and anonymity and confidentiality of the data were ensured.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, allowing a flexible approach that favored the exploration of the participants' perceptions. The interviews were conducted in a private environment and recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview script addressed issues related to the triggering factors of depression and anxiety, the implications of these disorders in professional practice and the coping strategies used by the interviewees.

For data analysis, discourse analysis was used, an approach that allows interpreting not only the explicit content of the statements, but also the implicit meanings and social constructions present in the participants' reports. The transcripts of the interviews were carefully analyzed, identifying patterns, recurring themes and significant aspects related to the investigated theme.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis revealed that depression and anxiety among health professionals are strongly related to adverse conditions in the work environment. Among the most cited factors, work overload, pressure for results and continuous exposure to the suffering of others stood out. According to respondents E02 and E07, excessive demand means that "there is no time to breathe", generating a state of constant emotional exhaustion.

The lack of institutional support emerged as a critical element. Many participants reported that the absence of spaces to discuss their difficulties and the almost exclusive focus on institutional goals contribute to the worsening of psychological suffering. For E05 and E13, "managers rarely ask how we are doing" and "support is almost non-existent, except when we are already at the limit". Another relevant aspect was the influence of the social environment and interpersonal interactions at work.

Although some professionals found support among colleagues, competitiveness and internal conflicts were also pointed out as triggering factors for anxiety. According to E03, "it's hard to trust someone at work, because everyone seems to be always ready to criticize." The impact on quality of life was a recurring theme.

Many professionals have described how symptoms of depression and anxiety negatively affect their personal relationships and their ability to relax outside of the work environment. According to E01, "even at home, I keep thinking about the patients and the problems that remained in the hospital". E08 added, "My family complains that I'm distant, but I can't disconnect."

Regarding coping strategies, the participants presented varied approaches. Some mentioned individual practices, such as meditation and physical exercise, while others highlighted the importance of seeking professional psychological support. E09 and E10 shared, "therapy has been my outlet" and "I started practicing yoga, and it has helped a lot to reduce anxiety."

However, there have been reports of less adaptive strategies, such as the use of over-the-counter medications or excessive alcohol consumption. These behaviors were mainly associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulty in accessing healthier resources. According to E06, "sometimes a drink seems like the only solution to turn off the mind."

The analysis also revealed significant differences in how men and women face these challenges. Women reported greater pressure to reconcile professional demands with family responsibilities, while men mentioned difficulties in admitting vulnerabilities due to the stigma associated with emotional fragility. E12 stated, "As a man, I feel that I cannot show weakness, because that is seen as inability."

The respondents also highlighted the direct impacts of these disorders on professional practice. Some reported difficulties in maintaining focus and productivity, while others acknowledged the increased risk of clinical errors. E04 confessed: "one day, I almost administered the wrong medication because I was too distracted". The COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned as a game-changer for many attendees.

In addition to aggravating the symptoms of depression and anxiety, the period brought new demands and fears, such as the fear of contaminating family members. According to E14, "the last few years have been the most challenging of my life, both professionally and personally." Social support emerged as one of the most important protective factors. Professionals who reported having a solid support network, whether at work or outside of it, demonstrated greater resilience in the face of challenges. E11 stated: "my friends and family are my base; Without them, I don't know how I would be now."

However, many pointed to the need for institutional initiatives to promote psychological well-being. Mental health programs, more flexible working hours and the creation of spaces for decompression were some of the suggestions presented by the participants. E15 suggested: "if we had a psychologist available in the hospital, many problems could be avoided". Discourse analysis also revealed that the stigma associated with seeking professional help is a significant barrier.

Several participants reported fear of being judged or having their careers damaged if they admitted their vulnerability. For E07, "asking for help is still seen as a sign of weakness, which is a major obstacle." Finally, the participants highlighted the importance of an integrated approach to dealing with mental health. This includes both individual measures and structural changes in the work environment. According to E10, "it is not enough to take care of ourselves; Institutions need to take their share of responsibility."

The results of this research highlight the complexity of the topic and the need for multifaceted approaches to face the challenges of depression and anxiety among health professionals. The combination of individual accounts with the analysis of discursive patterns offers a solid basis for the development of effective and sustainable interventions.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research sought to understand the factors that contribute to the development of depression and anxiety among health professionals, to analyze the implications of these disorders in professional practice and to identify effective coping strategies. The results show that these disorders are closely related to work overload, lack of institutional support, pressures inherent to the profession and stigma associated with seeking psychological help.

The impacts on professional practice are profound, reflected in the quality of patient care, the increased risk of clinical errors, and the deterioration of interpersonal relationships in the workplace. In addition, these disorders significantly affect the personal lives of

professionals, compromising their family relationships and their ability to relax and disconnect from occupational demands.

With regard to coping strategies, although many participants adopted healthy approaches, such as therapy, physical exercise, and mindfulness practices, others resorted to less adaptive mechanisms, such as substance use. This variation reflects the need to expand access to mental health resources and to implement institutional programs that encourage self-care practices and promote psychological well-being.

Gender differences and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic also highlight the diversity of experiences within the group of health professionals, reinforcing the need for personalized interventions that are sensitive to the specific demands of each context.

Thus, the research achieved its objective by identifying the main risk factors for depression and anxiety, demonstrating their implications in professional practice, and highlighting the importance of coping strategies as a fundamental part of coping with these challenges. The results point to the urgent need for joint actions between professionals, institutions and public policies to promote a healthier and more sustainable work environment, ensuring both the mental health of workers and the quality of services provided to the population.

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