

Strategies for mental health promotion in graduate students: Experience report

Estratégias para promoção de saúde mental em discentes na pós-graduação: Relato de experiência

Estrategias para la promoción de la salud mental en estudiantes de posgrado: Reporte de experiencia

RESUMO

Objetivo: relatar a experiência vivenciada no componente curricular “Tópicos especiais sobre saúde mental nos processos de formação”. Método: Trata-se de um estudo com abordagem qualitativa do tipo relato de experiência. A vivência descrita nesse estudo ocorreu durante o semestre 2019/2 em uma disciplina da pós-graduação da Escola de Enfermagem da Universidade Federal da Bahia. A turma foi composta por 07 discentes, de faixa etária variando entre 24 a 39 anos, desses, 04 matriculados como aluno especial e 03 alunos regulares do curso de doutorado em enfermagem. Resultado: Durante o semestre, além das aulas teóricas sobre adoecimento psíquico e discussão em sala sobre saúde mental dos pós-graduandos, ocorreram atividades terapêuticas e de relaxamento para os discentes com técnicas estratégicas de promoção à saúde mental. Conclusão: Dessa forma, evidenciou-se que nesse processo de aprendizado as técnicas utilizadas como estratégias resultaram na diminuição do estresse, ansiedade e autoconhecimento sobre o corpo.

DESCRITORES: Saúde Mental; Pós-graduação; Universidade; Estudantes; Adoecimento.

ABSTRACT

Objective: to report the experience lived in the curricular component “Special topics on mental health in training processes”. Method: This is a study with a qualitative approach of the experience report type. The experience described in this study took place during the 2019/2 semester in a graduate course at the School of Nursing at the Federal University of Bahia. The class consisted of 07 students, aged between 24 and 39 years old, of which 04 enrolled as special students and 03 regular students of the doctorate in nursing. Result: During the semester, in addition to theoretical classes on psychic illness and discussion in the classroom about postgraduate students' mental health, there were therapeutic and relaxation activities for students with strategic techniques to promote mental health. Conclusion: Thus, it was evidenced that in this learning process the techniques used as strategies resulted in the reduction of stress, anxiety and self-knowledge about the body.

DESCRIPTORS: Mental Health; Postgraduate studies; University; Students; Illness.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: relatar la experiencia vivida en el componente curricular “Temas especiales de salud mental en los procesos formativos”. Método: Se trata de un estudio con abordaje cualitativo del tipo relato de experiencia. La experiencia descrita en este estudio ocurrió durante el semestre 2019/2 en un curso de posgrado en la Escuela de Enfermería de la Universidad Federal de Bahía. La clase estuvo compuesta por 07 alumnos, con edades entre 24 y 39 años, de los cuales 04 cursaron como alumnos especiales y 03 alumnos regulares del doctorado en enfermería. Resultado: Durante el semestre, además de las clases teóricas sobre la enfermedad psíquica y la discusión en el aula sobre la salud mental de los estudiantes de posgrado, hubo actividades terapéuticas y de relajación para los estudiantes con técnicas estratégicas para promover la salud mental. Conclusión: Así, se evidenció que en este proceso de aprendizaje las técnicas utilizadas como estrategias resultaron en la reducción del estrés, la ansiedad y el autoconocimiento sobre el cuerpo.

DESCRIPTORES: Salud Mental; Posgraduación; Universidad; Estudiantes; Enfermedad.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychic illness, inherent to all human beings, has become a much discussed and addressed topic of global magnitude. More specifically, the illness of postgraduate students gained form and proportion by confirming the University as a place of illness.

It is known that entering university for young people can be considered a moment of intense change, transition from high school to pursuing academic and professional life, increasing responsibilities and commitment to their daily activities. Thus, higher education causes personal, cognitive, affective and social changes in students; the university period is made up of a diversity of academic experiences that are intertwined with the challenges arising from entering university.^{1,2}

In this context, discussions about the health of university students have been taking on an increasingly prominent level, especially with regard to academic vanity and the proportions that this has taken on postgraduate studies. This, sometimes, can assume and prioritize an

“inPhonelectual character”, judging, inferiorizing and defining profiles based on that.³

In Brazil, the issue of health conditions among university students has been discussed due to the high prevalence of depression and suicide risk in the academic universe. This happens mainly among students in the health area, as shown in the study carried out at the Universidade de Ciências Médicas de Minas. High rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal behavior were compared among medical, physiotherapy and occupational therapy students.⁴ Also in this sense, studies show that medical, nursing and pharmacy students also have a high prevalence of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation, with similar results found in the comparative method.^{5,6}

In the graduate scenario, it is no different. A survey carried out in January 2018, with the participation of 637 postgraduate students from the University of Brasília (UnB), showed alarming numbers in relation to the psychic suffering faced by students of the academy. The rate of students thinking about suicide on a daily basis and once a week was 9.83%, which is

143 times higher than the average of suicides in Brazil, which is equivalent to an average of 6.3/100,000 inhabitants. The main symptoms felt during the postgraduate academic experience were: anxiety 90%, discouragement 71.6%, irritability 63.1%, energy, reduced desire and motivation 59.1% and sadness 58.1%, showing that these signs are present in most of the students who participated in the research. Positioning and relationships with professors and advisors, as well as the lack of scholarships, structure and investment were the main demotivators for continuing in postgraduate studies, highlighting relational and governmental problems as a structuring factor of the problem (not the only one, however, with a lot of negative influence on the mental health of graduate students).⁷

In this worrying scenario, it is necessary to think of strategies so that university students can have a space for creation, relaxation, bonding and approximation with the university. Thus, the following research question is chosen: What strategies can be adopted to promote mental health in graduate students? And as an objective: to report the experience lived

in the curricular component “Special topics on mental health in training processes”.

METHOD

This is a study with a qualitative approach of the experience report type. The experience described in this study took place during the 2019.² semester in the subject “Special topics of mental health in training processes” linked to the School of Nursing of the Federal University of Bahia.

The discipline was taught on Mondays from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm and had a workload of 34 hours, distributed in 10 meetings of 3 hours each and 2 meetings of 2 hours each, being distributed in face-to-face participatory classes, seminars, extracurricular theoretical and practical activities and writing an experience report with guidance from the professor and use of digital technologies in the process. The discipline coordinator allowed the insertion of new content by the students as the need for discussion in the classroom arose, themes that were related to psychic suffering and illness in students and also subjects related to the theses or dissertations of the students who participated (such as, for example, suicidal behavior and mental suffering in undergraduate students).

Among the weekly contents and practical activities to be developed were: Overview of mental health in graduate school, with emphasis on basic definitions of the subject and epidemiological data; Epidemiology of suffering and/or psychic illness during the graduate training process, its determinants and its interface with diversities/inequalities; Contribution of students, professors and postgraduate demands in this illness process; Contribution of psychology as a science for reflection on the subject and development of more functional strategies for coping with the problem in question; Coping strategies and re-signification of different situations during the training process; Importance of promo-

ting mental health in postgraduate studies; Evidence of successful paths in promoting mental health and the possibility of searching for new paths suited to the reality of each program; Activities aimed at promoting mental health and coping strategies for the problem studied, under teacher supervision and class on how to write an experience report.

The class consisted of 07 students: 06 nurses, 01 pedagogue, aged between 24 and 39 years old, of these, 04 enrolled as special students and 03 regular students of the doctorate course in nursing. It is noteworthy that this was the first class of the component, as it had never been offered before at the School of Nursing.

EXPERIENCE REPORT

During the semester, in addition to theoretical classes on psychic illness and classroom discussion on post-graduate students' mental health, therapeutic and relaxation activities for students were conducted by professors and external guests. Throughout the course of the discipline, the reports of the results of the practices were enriching for the learning process. Thus, these will be reports following the sequence of events during the course of the curricular component.

MEDITATION

The practice of meditation was inserted in the context of the discipline in the first weeks after the theoretical classes and discussions on the subject. Most of the students, at some point in their lives, had already meditated, so everyone joined the activity, obtaining positive results. To direct the moments of meditation, the teacher used the mindfulness technique, with a translation into Portuguese close to “mind full” or “attention full”.

During practice, it was noticed that thoughts slow down, breathing becomes regular, and it is possible to reach a certain degree of relaxation and reduction of anxiety. For each meeting, different meditations were used, deepening the idea of approximation with the “I” and also with the “other”, exercising subjective ac-

tions such as forgiveness and compassion. Upon completion, the class concluded that meditation is an integrative practice that should be inserted, more disseminated and developed in the academic environment, as it results in visible improvements in production, concentration and stress reduction.

Corroborating arguments for including mindfulness in higher education include claims about the benefits of the practice for critical thinking. While there is theoretical support for this claim, empirical support is still considered limited.^{8,9} With that in mind, an American study developed a mindfulness program that was adapted for graduate nurses, with the aim of monitoring the advances and results of the application of the technique. The results showed that mindfulness training improves attention in undergraduate and graduate nurses. The effects of meditation, however, were found to be more profound in postgraduate nurses particularly with regard to improvements in stress levels, concentration, attention, sleep and empathy.¹⁰

On the other hand, despite being a technique with many benefits for mental health, studies show that it takes a long time for the effects of its application to begin to be visible. Randomized research carried out in New Zealand, with undergraduate and graduate medical students, failed to contemplate the objective of scientifically proving the results of mindfulness, and launched some hypotheses for such a result, among them, considering that this meditation is a skill that takes time to learn and even more time to teach it to others, suggesting that it can be effective for some students, but not for all.¹¹

Given the above, it is possible to see that meditation practices require attention, concentration and dedication. Mindfulness can achieve significant results both for academic and personal life, being a driving tool for reducing psychic suffering.

DYSFUNCTIONAL THOUGHTS REGISTRATION (DTR)

Continuing the activities carried out in the classroom, for two weeks, the students had the opportunity to exercise the (re)reading of moments and situations experienced in everyday life and how they reacted and solved the obstacles that arose. For this, the teacher inserted the dysfunctional thoughts record table, which was divided into: date/time; situation; automatic thinking; emotion; behavior; alternative thinking and alternative behavior. Each item in the table had to be filled in according to a specific situation, which for some reason disturbed us during the week and thus it would be possible to rethink attitudes, thoughts, behavior and the way of positioning oneself in the face of a challenge or stressful event.

Initially thinking about one's own actions and coming to the conclusion of what could be done better, is almost a "self-therapy" to be practiced. In the self-assessment, it was possible to perceive that many thoughts are impulsive and, sometimes, can control actions in an unexpected or thoughtless way. Some of the situations that involved greater reflection and emotion were: "farewell of a close relative", "proposal of change in the academic environment" and "conflict situation with colleagues in graduate school". By sharing the records, it was possible to make a critical analysis mainly of automatic thoughts (which can become alternative thoughts) and behavior (which can become alternative behavior), so emotions such as anger, sadness and anguish can be controlled and felt differently to learn to deal with internal and external conflicts.

The DTR increases objectivity and makes it easier for the individual to remember events, thoughts and feelings that occurred. Sometimes, the person needs training to use the diary, being able to identify automatic thoughts, first pointing to their emotional state.¹²

Bringing this context to the reality of psychosocial care in the community, a case study with an abstinent crack user

showed his records about what he thought about crack and how his trajectory was until he stopped treatment. Through the DTR, it was possible for the user to make observations about how much it is necessary to curb their impulsive, imperative and unreasonable side with certain situations. In his speech, he also reports that he came to the conclusion that only with the control and understanding of his emotions would it be possible to achieve, in a positive and satisfactory way, the objective of resolving his psychological and behavioral conflicts.¹³

Thus, it is possible to emphasize that from certain experiences, the DTR can be used to help identify the thoughts that were activated by a certain situation, as well as the consequent emotion and behavior.^{14,15} In addition, the class concluded that the DTR exercise could clarify and modify the meanings that were attributed to adverse and disturbing events.

YOGA

At the end of the course, one of the best-known and practiced integrative practices in the Eastern world was conducted by one of the students in the class. Yoga exercises involving strength, endurance and balance required a lot of concentration and effort from the class. The results were not felt instantly, but the physical body showed over the days more disposition and flexibility of the muscles.

Contrary to what was thought, Yoga exercises made you sweat, move and recognize the body, as well as bodybuilding, treadmill, weight lifting, among others. The difference is that in addition to working the physical, Yoga activities help with concentration, physical and mental resistance, self-knowledge and also decrease stress levels. As reported by the participants at the end of the practice, the relaxation and feeling of tranquility overcame the physical fatigue of the more complex movements.

In this sense, there are several systematic review and meta-analysis studies that also described positive results of Yoga, in school and academic programs, as posi-

ve. The main results found in the research concern the improvement in the mood state¹⁵, feeling of happiness and relaxation¹⁶, self-control regarding aggression, irritability, and social problems¹⁷, anxiety reduction¹⁸ and stimuli in relation to memory and concentration at work.¹⁹ Taken together, these studies suggest positive effects reported by students, mainly on psychosocial well-being.

Another more recent study with medical students also revealed that Yoga practices play an important role both in the primary prevention of cardiovascular disease and in preventing the progression of heart disease. There was also an improvement in cardiovascular efficiency even in students already affected by some cardiovascular pathology. Mindful breathing strengthens the heart muscles and improves the oxygen-carrying capacity of blood vessels, and in addition, meditation-induced relaxation helps stabilize the autonomic nervous system. In general, the benefits of Yoga were found to include greater resistance to stressful conditions and reduction of risk factors for various diseases, especially cardiorespiratory diseases.²⁰

Thus, it reinforces and proves once again the importance of integrative and complementary practices to health in academic environments. Taking into account the experience lived by the students, in the doctoral process or as a regular student, the activities developed in the discipline aroused a cascade of positive effects on the mind and body. This will consequently reflect on academic life, interpersonal relationships and self-knowledge to deal with and control thoughts and behaviors in adverse situations.

CONCLUSION

During the semester, it was possible to perceive that meditation techniques, the Dysfunctional Thought Recording therapy and the practice of Yoga are important strategies for promoting mental health in graduate students. This was due to the positive results regarding the reduction of

stress, anxiety and self-knowledge about the body.

In this context, it is important to mention the role of graduate programs and teaching collegiate bodies, as they need to be prepared to help students manage conflicting situations. Cognitive-behavioral approaches, therapeutic groups, psychodrama, systematic organization of the academic and personal schedule to reconcile with social life and financial planning

can also be other strategies to minimize psychic suffering and reduce the impact of course stress. However, there is a need for these methods to be further studied, researched, tested and disseminated to the academic world so that they may have applicability and viable continuity.

It should be noted that these weekly activities were only possible to be carried out through the subject "Special topics on mental health in training processes".

Thus, it is possible to understand the importance of including components in the university scenario that integrate the theory and practice of activities that contribute to the maintenance and improvement of mental health. With this, students will be able to become multipliers of knowledge and reach new spaces for discussion, research and teaching for undergraduate and graduate students in different areas of knowledge.

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