

Mental health at the university: report of a psychotherapy service for students of nursing**Saúde mental na universidade: relato de um serviço de psicoterapia para estudantes de enfermagem****Salud mental en la universidad: relato de un servicio de psicoterapia para estudiantes de enfermería****Deise Coelho de Souza¹****Lucas Rossato²****Vivian Fukumasu da Cunha³****Patrícia Paiva Carvalho de Oliveira⁴****Suzana Oliveira Campos⁵****Fabio Scorsolini-Comin⁶****Received: 25/11/2019****Approved: 11/05/2020****Published: 01/08/2020**

This is an experience report that aims to present a psychological support service developed at the University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing to assist undergraduate nursing students. The service was opened in the first half of 2019 and offers psychological interventions in individual and group modalities. The activities are coordinated by a professor and developed by graduate students with a background in Psychology. In 2019, 51 students were served. It is known that the trajectory of students in higher education is marked by changes in affective, social and professional spheres, requiring adjustments that are not always answered properly. In this way, the services provided so far have enabled psychological reception and qualified listening in interventions that seek to assist in mental health and quality of life. Initiatives like this contribute to prevention of mental illness and to improvement of emotional conditions of students who are already experiencing psychopathological symptoms.

Descriptors: Psychotherapy; Students, Nursing; Mental health; Education, Higher; Student health services.

Este é um relato de experiência que tem por objetivo apresentar um serviço de apoio psicológico desenvolvido na Escola de Enfermagem de Ribeirão Preto da Universidade de São Paulo para o atendimento de estudantes de graduação em Enfermagem. O serviço foi inaugurado no primeiro semestre de 2019 e oferece acolhimento em intervenções nas modalidades individual e grupal. As atividades são coordenadas por um docente e desenvolvidas por pós-graduandos com formação em Psicologia. No ano de 2019 foram atendidos 51 estudantes. Sabe-se que o percurso de estudantes no ensino superior é marcado por mudanças nas esferas afetiva, social e profissional, exigindo ajustamentos que nem sempre são respondidos adequadamente. Deste modo, os serviços prestados até o momento possibilitaram o acolhimento e escuta qualificada em intervenções que procuraram auxiliar na saúde mental e na qualidade de vida. Iniciativas como essa contribuem na prevenção ao adoecimento psíquico e na melhoria das condições emocionais de estudantes que já estão vivenciando sintomas psicopatológicos.

Descritores: Psicoterapia; Estudantes de enfermagem; Saúde mental; Educação superior; Serviços de saúde para estudantes.

Se trata de un informe de experiencia que tiene por objeto presentar un servicio de apoyo psicológico desarrollado en la Escuela de Enfermería de Ribeirão Preto de la Universidade de São Paulo para asistir a los estudiantes universitarios de Enfermería. El servicio se inauguró en el primer semestre de 2019 y ofrece acogida en intervenciones en las modalidades individual y grupal. Las actividades son coordinadas por un profesor y desarrolladas por estudiantes de posgrado con formación en Psicología. En 2019 se atendieron 51 estudiantes. Se sabe que el camino de los estudiantes de la enseñanza superior se caracteriza por cambios en las esferas afectiva, social y profesional, que requieren ajustes a los que no siempre se responde adecuadamente. De esta manera, los servicios prestados hasta ahora han permitido recibir y escuchar intervenciones calificadas que buscaban ayudar en la salud mental y la calidad de vida. Iniciativas como éstas contribuyen a la prevención de las enfermedades psicológicas y a la mejora de las condiciones emocionales de los estudiantes que ya están experimentando síntomas psicopatológicos.

Descriptores: Psicoterapia; Estudiantes de enfermería; Salud mental; Educación superior; Servicios de salud para estudiantes.

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INTRODUCTION

With the end of high school, concerns about the future are particularly active in the lives of adolescents, as for a significant portion of them must prepare for entry into higher education¹. The transition from high school to university represents an important step in the educational path of people, since this process is associated with their professional future.

Entry into higher education is characterized as a major event in the lives of students, and it is permeated by changes that will affect their development. This period is marked by complex changes in personal, affective, social and professional spheres, which may interfere with the student's ability to adapt to this new context of life².

The experiences in the new educational context will be permeated by events that can be experienced as challenging and will interfere with quality of life and aspects of physical and emotional health. The impact of entering higher education on the subjects' lives demands adjustments, as the need to organize actions that promote a good adaptation to this context³⁻⁵.

Entering higher education requires the student to know how to deal with situations related to academic life, interpersonal relationships, expectations regarding professional future, adaptation to new contexts, among other aspects. University entrance, in many situations, will require changes and adaptations to new contexts, situations and interpersonal relationships that will significantly change the developmental pathways of these students.

Among the most recurrent situations are leaving home, having to live in another city, the distance from parents, family and friends, construction of new emotional bonds, need for financial management, demands and pressures of the academic environment, need for greater independence in studies and greater autonomy, acquisition of new responsibilities, solidification of professional choice, among many other demands that previously did not exist^{6,7}.

Admission to higher education should also be considered as an important time of the students' experiences since, it marks the beginning of adult life to most of them. This transition period between adolescence and adulthood can be especially important because it allows the coexistence of characteristics from both phases. Thus, upon entering university, many students retain characteristics typical of adolescence, while they increasingly need to express and develop characteristics associated with the adult universe, notably in terms of greater autonomy and responsibility for their own developmental path.

In this time of life, there is a need to adjust to a new context, in which responsibilities, relational, affective and sexual issues, socioeconomic pressures and concerns about the job market are intensified⁸. Also, most students already enter university with high expectations, feeling pressured to match internal and external demands, factors that, when associated, can generate intense anguish and insecurity^{7,9}.

Such situations present in the students' daily lives require a process of constant adaptation, which can contribute to their maturation, as well as to their cognitive and affective development. When such situations are associated with emotional and social vulnerabilities, they can lead to psychological distress. The demands coming from the university can trigger or aggravate physical and mental health problems^{7,8}. Thus, university experiences can both contribute to situations previously expressed by students, empowering them, as well as promoting new processes of illness due to characteristics of this new period of life, associated with a new period of educational training.

In the university population, it has been common to present psychopathological symptoms due to situations experienced due to entering higher education. It is common for university students to have some type of psychopathological symptoms throughout their education, with frequent symptoms that characterize episodes of depression and anxiety. Especially in the health area, these students have high levels of stress and anxiety⁶. Therefore,

it is recommended to pay attention to the greater vulnerability of this population regarding the use of psychoactive substances⁹.

Thus, courses in areas of health can promote a greater exposure of the student to stress in the face of the responsibility to care, to provide an adequate and qualified service, as well as dealing emotionally with the suffering often expressed by people who seek health services. That happens because they mobilize feelings about the future performance, given that they work directly with people.

This scenario demonstrates the need to monitor students in health courses, and it is important that educational institutions plan and carry out actions that assess the emotional conditions of university students and assist in their adaptation in the academic context, avoiding dropout and abandonment of the course. All of these issues underline the relevance of expanding strategies for preventing and promoting mental health among students in the university context¹⁰.

The role the university plays in this field is clear, so that higher education institutions have encouraged strategies to cope with mental illness with a view to promoting health of university students¹⁰. In this sense, several welcoming activities have been observed, discussion and reflection groups about entering, adapting and staying at university, listening and reflecting groups about experiences in the academic context. There are also services with a multidisciplinary team that offer psychological screening, brief psychotherapy and monitoring educational, besides groups of community therapy. Academic and extension activities, such as Academic Leagues, are also mentioned; which allow integration between freshmen and veterans, academic affiliations, among other possibilities of integration, reception and care with the university student.

Based on this panorama and considering the need to share successful experiences in the field both of student reception and of interventions in mental health with university students, this study aimed to present a psychological support service developed at the University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing to assist undergraduate nursing students.

METHOD

It is a report of professional experience. The target experience of the narrative is a psychological support service (the Health Psychology Center), developed at the University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing (EERP-USP, in Portuguese) to assist undergraduate nursing students. The service was opened in the first semester of 2019, and the experience narrated in this study covers description and analysis of its first year of operation. The experience will be described from the way this service was implemented in 2019, and the discussion will be linked to scientific production both in the field of student reception and in the mental health of university students.

RESULTS

Based on the need for health promotion and disease prevention in the university public, added to the demand of EERP-USP observed through student welcoming actions throughout 2018, which pointed to the need for many of its students to be able to have access to some type of psychological assistance, the Health Psychology Center of University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing (HPC-EERP-USP) was created in July of 2018. It had the objective of carrying out actions aimed at welcoming and promoting mental health together with that audience. The beginning of the activities of the HPC-EERP-USP was also due to the perception of the need for investment in the mental health of university students at EERP-USP, due to several complaints reported in spaces such as graduation commissions or even directly with some professors.

The service on screen offers psychological support in interventions in individual and group modalities. The consultations take place in a private room located in a house outside the HPC-EERP-USP, but inside *campus*, where other mental health services work, such as PROCURA, aimed at users of alcohol and other drugs, and the Mindfulness Center, which develops social, educational and mental health interventions with different audiences. The HPC-EERP-USP is coordinated by a professor from EERP-USP with a background in Psychology. In 2019, the services were provided by a team composed of five psychotherapists and graduate students from EERP-USP.

In terms of the number of services provided at HPC-EERP-USP, 23 undergraduate students were screened during the month of September of 2019. Five students did not attend the screening moment and two were no longer interested in the service as they were already undergoing psychotherapy. Up to the end of 2019, the service has served and/or serves 18 undergraduates. It also had three dropouts. These data inform that 51 undergraduate students had some type of contact with HPC-EERP-USP in 2019. This number represents 9.6% of the total undergraduate students at EERP-USP, according to data reported by the Institution. As for February of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, physical appointments were not resumed after the vacation period. Two cases began to be cared for through online appointments.

Next, the Discussion section will present reflections on how the service has been structured and based on the results obtained in the first year of construction of the service. The discussion was organized into three reflective axes: (a) Reception at university as a curricular component; (b) The Center for Health Psychology at EERP-USP and (c) Next steps and the future of HPC-EERP-USP.

DISCUSSION

Reception at university as a curricular component

The strategies narrated here are important because they constitute a list of actions that include student reception as a curricular component and no longer as an action of the university in relation to its students. These student attendance policies, especially those related to transition to university, start to be guided by the need for reception and guidance of the student at this moment, improving not only their mental health, but also enabling lower dropout rates, and that professional training can be combined with the consideration that the university needs to promote care also to those who are graduating. In the case of students of health courses, it is a matter of resuming a commonplace when discussing care: caring for those who care. Caring for those who care, in this sense, ceases to be a possible or desirable strategy and becomes an institutional policy¹¹.

The University São Paulo (USP) has developed different actions in order to promote student reception. In spite of the already existing traditional services, such as support from Social Services in granting aid (housing, transportation, permanence, emergencies), as well as offering psychological assistance in school services, as well as the support provided by the course organizing commissions and undergraduate commissions, new initiatives have been devised and put into practice in recent years. An example is the construction of the Mental Health Office, created in 2018 on the *campus* of São Paulo, and which has been providing psychological, including emergency, assistance to students from the various courses at USP-São Paulo.

Several initiatives are also being developed on *campus* in the interior of the state of São Paulo. An example of a care strategy is the reception of university students entering the course at the HPC-EERP-USP, with the proposal to discuss the transition between high school and higher education¹². The integration of the participating university students, the deep participation and involvement of the members throughout the meeting and the students' perception verbalized through positive feedback regarding this welcoming space offered by the institution stands out¹².

These actions, however, are not restricted to USP, but have increasingly crossed the different institutions, both public and private. Other services that can also be offered to university students are: screening, psychodiagnosis, reception, psychological duty, brief psychotherapy, group psychotherapy, among others.

These consultations can be carried out in different ways, either through Psychology school services or when the institution has a staff of psychologists responsible for serving this population. Meeting the needs of students by higher education institutions is important, because at the same time that they create welcoming spaces, they promote discussion, reflection and health promotion, in addition to problematizing the impact of this space on the lives of subjects and the debate about how university life can be considered as a stressful event and subjects' illness.

In view of the university students' illness process, undergraduate students in the health area a specific public that has shown the need for greater care regarding their mental health. This population is exposed to different contexts and potentially stressful situations linked to teaching and service environment, competition to routine studies, internships, assessments, power relations between teachers and students, and others.

For Nursing, there are specific demands of the course, such as high workload, insertion in care spaces that deal with life and death, insertion in stages that require time, dedication, long hours of work, the rigor required in execution of procedures that can be invasive for patients, exposure to risks and constant fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated by teachers who supervise practices. These elements make this course highly stressful and emotionally draining. Thus, it is clear that, due to the context of nursing education, there is a greater exposure to elements considered to be vulnerable, which coincides with construction of a professional identity¹³⁻¹⁵.

Considering that adapting to higher education is an important process to be considered by educational institutions, EERP-USP has sought to develop actions and create spaces that foster psychological reception and encourage promotion of the mental health of its students. An example was the creation of the Student Reception Committee in 2018, made up of teachers, students and staff with the aim of developing welcoming activities with a focus on student care.

These activities would take place through construction of a space for attention, listening, guidance, socializing, integration and belonging to the academic environment. The creation of the EERP-USP Mentoring Program, implemented in September of 2019 and also the Student Host League of EERP-USP, with activities started in August 2019, are some of the activities carried out by the Committee.

The Center Health Psychology at EERP-USP

The HPC-EERP-USP consists of a group of culture and extension coordinated by a professor of the Nursing course that promotes welcoming and assistance to undergraduate students in Nursing (Bachelor of Nursing and Bachelor and Licentiate Degree of Nursing). The activities of HPC-EERP-USP are developed through voluntary work of psychologists, linked to activities of the Graduate Program in Psychiatric Nursing and aims to develop a reference work through brief interventions in individual and group modalities, expanding health promotion and prevention of mental illness.

All professionals who provide care have experience in psychotherapeutic care, and each performs their care following technical guidelines of the approach that guides performance. Currently, there are psychotherapists linked to psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral and socio-historical approaches.

The psychological assistance offered at HPC-EERP-USP is free and exclusive to undergraduate nursing students at USP at the Ribeirão Preto *Campus*. Initially, the type of consultations planned was brief psychotherapy, with up to eight meetings lasting 50 minutes each.

The service was inaugurated in the first semester of 2019, and was made public through the creation of HPC-EERP-USP profiles on social networks (Facebook and Instagram), institutional electronic communication for undergraduate classes and posters in notice boards, in order to enlist interested parties for the service. In view of the volunteer status of psychologists who participate in the service, the communication strategy adopted between the interested parties and the team of professionals was electronic mail (e-mail).

From an e-mail expressing interest in the service, the team requested information about personal data such as full name, which semester they are currently studying, age, e-mail, telephone number for contact and main reason why they are interested in the service. All information was listed in order of registration from that contact. The number of registrations and interested parties made up the need to create a queue for calls, following priority of always attending to the order of registration request.

With the start of consultations, the attempt to prioritize the order of enrollment was not always possible in practice, for reasons such as: (a) conflict of schedules available to students and psychologist; (b) request for emergency assistance based on requests from EERP-USP (such as from course organizing committees or even from teachers seeking assistance for students in greater distress). Over time, the number of registrations with the number of available and offered times ended up not meeting the requested service needs.

As the activities were developed, the need to reanalyze the format of appointments was satisfied, offering an increase in the number of sessions depending on demands of students. Thus, the number of students on the waiting list increased significantly during the initial months of service provision. Consequently, the availability time for a new vacancy increased and the waiting list ended up not being served fluently, requiring new adjustments in the service offer procedure.

As a strategy to accommodate the demand of students on the waiting list, the team opted to conduct a screening period throughout September 2019 to meet the students who signed up for the appointments and understand the demands that motivated them to seek care service. This moment was important to analyze behavioral and subjective aspects of the students that could highlight the need for assistance and establish priorities in the service order, not just the order of enrollment in the service.

Concerns about offering some psychological support to EERP-USP undergraduates become more intense when the information that the Nursing course is predominantly composed of female graduates and that data indicate that women are more susceptible to development and manifestation of different anxiety subtypes and also have a worse quality of life compared to the male gender, regardless of the course⁶. Such questions raise the HPC-EERP-USP team with the proposal of a new challenge: offering the same type of psychological reception in the group modality, aiming to provide some more immediate support, in view of the waiting line, in order to cope the number of subscribers and the number of volunteers.

The path of screening and brief psychotherapy activities to date portrays the challenges of dealing with psychological distress in university context, in addition to indicating the importance of initiatives and programs that can address these issues, considering evidence that demonstrates the need for this care¹⁰. The main demands raised by university students served underline the difficulty in dealing with the necessary transition to adapt to Higher Education¹⁰, with reports of anxious, depressive and stressful symptoms⁸⁻¹³, suicidal ideation, difficulties in expressing social skills and self-care⁶⁻¹⁵ and establishment of interpersonal relationships within university, family and personal context³⁻⁵.

It is understood that most of these demands are in line with challenges of both transition from adolescence to adult life in contemporary times and transition to higher education, which must be accompanied by the adoption of coping strategies and also adaptation to the new context and its characteristics. Thus, these demands are consistent with studies mentioned in the present report that deal with the health of university students.

A challenge of the work are institutional barriers that are also part of facilities or difficulties in this path. EERP-USP does not provide a physical structure that can increase the number of services, even if there is a greater number of volunteers, as there are material and room limitations, which must be thought out and articulated in models that guarantee the quality of psychological service to the user, such as confidentiality, preservation of their identities, security and comfort to express themselves freely. There is also no articulation of a multiprofessional partnership, necessary in case of more serious disorders and medicalization. On the other hand, the Institution expresses support for the initiative through dissemination of service, availability of office supplies, without also introducing new impediments.

Another highlight is given to the limits of the team of volunteer psychologists, who sometimes have available hours, but that do not fit the availability of free time for undergraduates. It is necessary to consider that the Bachelor of Nursing course has classes in the morning and evening periods, while the Bachelor and Licentiate course in Nursing has afternoon and evening activities. In the case of graduates from the last few years, internships that may occur in periods other than those of classes, and even in services and equipment outside *campus*, which can hinder access to services.

Given these conditions, it is observed that what is offered does not always meet the possibilities of students, reflecting the team's limitations, but also delimitations of this service from the institutional condition. It was in practice that these issues were revealed and demanded new adaptations from volunteers, who also suffer from vicissitudes of their personal and professional issues. Also, the configuration of volunteering is linked to the condition of institutional link, a group composed mainly of PhD students from EERP-USP. In this context, there are no guarantees that the service will continue to exist for a long time, if there are no graduate students with a background in Psychology linked to the Graduate Program in Psychiatric Nursing.

Next steps and the future of HPC-EERP-USP

In view of the path taken so far, there is a need for constant adaptation and improvement of the services offered, in structural order and in the personnel who provide the services. Since the beginning of its activities, HPC-EERP-USP has undergone and still undergoes typical adaptations of a public service related to management of physical resources and personnel.

The psychotherapeutic setting where meetings are held, for example, has been adapted and organized as the allocation of financial resources is being distributed. Thus, the space takes shape through the acquisition of furniture and materials that come through public resources, as well as through donations, with a view to providing a comfortable space that promotes constant improvement in the quality of the services offered.

As much as there are barriers that interfere in the development of activities, there are elements that are essential such as: a committed team, which adjusts and is constantly adapting to challenges that are posed, the exchange of experiences and case discussions among psychologists, the analysis of each case and the search for effective intervention strategies for demands presented, institution's incentive for development of actions and provision of physical space, material resources, disclosure, availability of administrative technicians to assist when necessary so that practical activities take place, the guidance and monitoring of a teacher who is committed to the service provided, among others.

Currently, in addition to services already offered, psychological reception in the group modality is being planned in order to promote a space for the exchange of experiences among students. Group consultations will provide students with one more resource to work on aspects related to their mental health, in order to share lived experiences and create a space for empathetic listening and to discuss personal and academic issues. It is understood that the group service modality can be important because it allows not only sharing experiences related

to transition to higher education¹², but also a way of strengthening relationships, fostering social support and adopting collective strategies to face challenges of that period.

From these elements, it is highlighted that the HPC-EERP-USP is a service that can trigger important institutional reflections, not only at the USP, but also at other universities. Meeting the demands of undergraduate students in terms of mental health care has proven to be a reality and, more than that, an invitation for educational managers to insert this care as a necessary curricular component for the training of these students.

By promoting health and welcoming students in these courses, the university also engages in the task of thinking about care, in this case, starting with the care provided to whom it proposes to train. When care and welcoming become curricular components, they can become a policy to be developed and matured institutionally, creating material conditions so that services or actions can be implemented and developed with a view to promoting the well-being of their students. The HPC-EERP-USP is, therefore, an important initiative to be shared with educational managers from different institutions of higher education.

CONCLUSION

Paying attention to mental health conditions of higher education students has been a recurring demand nowadays, due to the number of cases of psychological illness in this population. The consequences of psychic illness in the university public have impacted the education system and influenced university dropout rates since, in many situations, students end up dropping out of courses because they are unable to deal with demands presented to them.

Entering higher education is a delicate process, as it involves a series of adjustments and demands on subjects who are not always in position to respond adequately to demands placed on them. Thus, educational institutions also need to develop actions, programs and services that are capable of helping students to face challenges that are posed in this process.

Student attendance services such as those offered by HPC-EERP-USP are important to be established, as they can accommodate demands that arise in the university population. The activities developed by these programs help students to face difficult situations that are personal and that directly interfere with academic performance.

It is known that poorly adapted experiences in the university space will have significant consequences for the development of subjects and will interfere with their physical, psychological, cognitive and relational aspects. Consequently, these aspects will affect the quality of life of subjects and will define their permanence or withdrawal from the chosen course.

Regarding the services offered by the HPC-EERP-USP, although it has not been able to meet total institutional demand, services provided so far make it possible to offer a psychological reception space, attentive listening and interventions that have sought to improve mental health conditions of those served. Also, screenings made it possible to meet students who had not yet been attended, understand their demands, analyze the emotional state and possible psychopathological conditions, providing data for planning and organizing new activities.

Such itineraries can be important to contribute to new initiatives being developed and implemented, aiming to create a list of actions that can be effectively embodied by higher education institutions with a view to including psychological reception as a curricular component and, with that, promoting an important innovation in the way students are being trained for the job market, for acting in health, for society and also for life.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Deise Coelho de Souza, Lucas Rossato, Vivian Fukumasu da Cunha and Patrícia Paiva Carvalho de Oliveira contributed with data collection, analysis and writing. **Suzana Oliveira Campos** participated on data collection and revision. **Fabio Scorsolini-Comin** worked on the elaboration of the project that originated this study, analysis and revision.

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