

## BRIEF PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION FOR THE PROMOTION OF WAYS TO COPE WITH STRESSORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

Enrolling in Higher Education includes various stressors for the student and the literature points to the need for interventions to facilitate adaptation to university. The academic experiences workshop, a brief psychological intervention (8 sessions) based on behavioral analysis, sought to develop repertoires for coping with the stressors present in higher education. Nine nursing students participated after signing consent terms. They provide answers before and after participating in the workshop: 1) the Self-Reporting Questionnaire, Brazilian version, an instrument for screening symptoms related to common mental disorders (CMD); and 2) the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PBS). Initially, 88.9% of participants had symptoms of CMD, and the mean EBEP was 24.97 (SD=1.22). After the intervention, only 22.2% of the students continued to present symptoms of CMD, and the mean EBEP increased to 29.34 (SD=1.17). The implications of this intervention are discussed in view of the challenges faced by School and Educational Psychology in Higher Education.

**Keywords:** stress; university students; psychological intervention

### Intervención psicológica corta para promoción del enfrentamiento de los estresores en la enseñanza universitaria

#### RESUMEN

La entrada en la enseñanza universitaria incluye estresores variados para el estudiante y la literatura apunta la necesidad de intervenciones para facilitar la adaptación a la universidad. El taller de vivencias académicas, una intervención psicológica corta (8 sesiones) de base analítico-comportamental, buscó desarrollar repertorios para el enfrentamiento de los estresores presentes en la enseñanza universitaria. Participaron 9 académicas de enfermería que, tras consentimiento, respondieron antes y después la participación en el taller: 1) el *Self-Reporting Questionnaire*, versión brasileña, un instrumento de selección de síntomas relacionados a trastornos mentales comunes (TMC); y 2) la Escala de Buen-estar Psicológico (EBEP). Inicialmente, el 88,9% de las participantes presentaban síntomas de TMC, y el promedio de la EBEP fue 24,97 (DP=1,22). Tras la intervención, solamente el 22,2% de las estudiantes continuaron presentando síntomas de TMC, y el promedio de la EBEP aumentó para 29,34 (DP=1,17). Las implicaciones de esta intervención son discutidas teniendo en vista los desafíos enfrentados por la Psicología Escolar y Educacional en la enseñanza universitaria.

**Palabras clave:** estrese; estudiantes universitarios; intervención psicológica

### Intervenção psicológica breve para promoção do enfrentamento dos estressores no Ensino Superior

#### RESUMO

O ingresso no Ensino Superior inclui estressores variados para o estudante e a literatura aponta a necessidade de intervenções para facilitar a adaptação à universidade. A oficina de vivências acadêmicas, uma intervenção psicológica breve (8 sessões) de base analítico-comportamental, buscou desenvolver repertórios para o enfrentamento dos estressores presentes no Ensino Superior. Participaram 9 acadêmicas de enfermagem, que após consentimento, responderam antes e após a participação na oficina: 1) o *Self-Reporting Questionnaire*, versão brasileira,

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de triagem de sintomas relacionados a transtornos mentais comuns (TMC); e 2) a Escala de Bem-estar Psicológico (EBEP). Inicialmente, 88,9% das participantes apresentavam sintomas de TMC, e a média da EBEP foi 24,97 (DP=1,22). Após a intervenção, somente 22,2% das estudantes continuaram apresentando sintomas de TMC, e a média da EBEP aumentou para 29,34 (DP=1,17). As implicações dessa intervenção são discutidas tendo em vista os desafios enfrentados pela Psicologia Escolar e Educacional no Ensino Superior.

**Palavras-chave:** estresse; estudantes universitários; intervenção psicológica

## INTRODUCTION

Educational psychology (EP) has been linked to the development of strategies for enhancing learning and teaching. It is present in nursing schools and basic education institutions. With the changes that took place in the Brazilian sociopolitical and economical scenario and the subsequent extension of access to higher education (HE), especially after the 1990s, new demands for EP emerged in this context (Serpa & Santos, 2001). Different modes for practice in higher education are possible for psychology, such as programs for student assistance with pedagogical interventions targeting learning or the mitigation of retention and evasion (Peretta, Oliveira, & Lima, 2019), direct approach to psychological problems among university students (Ramos et al., 2018), the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education (Ciantelle & Leite, 2016), the creation of educational policies (Santana, Pereira, & Rodrigues, 2014), and in the qualification of teachers (Zavanski & Facci, 2012).

The diversity of the higher education contingent regarding age, economic, and sociocultural background produces a new environment for the intellectual, social, and emotional learning for students (Soares & Del Prette, 2015). At the university, students face more complex challenges regarding autonomy, and the capacity to establish mature, social bonds (Soares et al., 2014), which requires the construction of new behavioral repertoires. Among the challenges present in higher education, we might include adaptation to the new study time and forms of examination in the academic system, as well as a commitment to professional formation (Oliveira, Carlotto, Vasconcelos, & Dias, 2014).

In this context, the changes in the lives of students that enter higher education have been studied as possible factors that trigger stress and anxiety, and might also affect quality of life, mental and physical health of undergraduates, as well as their academic performance (Porto & Soares, 2017). In this scenario, there is a highlight on the following possible stressors: heavier load of new information; disorganization of the time for accomplishing tasks and for social life; lack of motivation; financial difficulties; difficulty in their relationship with the teachers and classmates; peer competition, and the frustration of expectations regarding academic experience (Bardagi & Hutz, 2011). Especially in courses in the health area, the literature adds stressors such as contact with dangerous diseases, death, and the

suffering of patients on the clinical care (Hirsch et al., 2018; Jesus, Sena, Souza, Pereira, & Santos, 2015).

Difficulty in the management of these and other stressful events might contribute to evasion from higher education, which is a phenomenon that causes concern among scholars (Ambiel & Barros, 2018). Thus, literature indicates that in order to help university students and their process of adaptation and academic success, learning institutions might foster spaces for discussion, problem resolution, and the creation of services for student support (Bardagi & Hutz, 2014; Matta, Lebrão, & Heleno, 2017). Some strategies might be considered effective in this context: programs for professional guidance, for the development of social skills, for the reduction of stress and anxiety, and so on (Gomes & Soares, 2013; Ramos et al., 2018).

Such strategies, in combination, might contribute to the promotion of mental health of higher education students, which is something complex and multifaceted (Arinõ & Bardagi, 2018). When these interventions are developed by means of group activities, peer support might become a facilitator in the process of integration into the university environment, which contributes to the reduction of common mental disorders (stress, depression, and anxiety) among students (Tomás, Ferreira, Araújo, & Almeida, 2014).

In the field of group interventions targeting the stressors present in higher education, Ramos, Kuster, Ramalhete and Nascimento (2019) assessed the indicators for stress and anxiety, before and after the participation of university students in workshops for anxiety and stress management. After participation in the workshop, there was a significant reduction in the levels of stress for most of the participants, who presented high anxiety and stress records before the intervention. On the other hand, the study by Carpena and Menezes (2018) employed interventions with the use of mindfulness meditation as a strategy to reduce the levels of stress and anxiety among the university students who participated in six weekly meetings for practicing focused meditation. It was possible to notice a significant reduction in the levels of stress and anxiety among the participants, and an increase in factors connected to the practice of mindfulness.

Thus, considering the stressors that are present in the academic context, and the studies that point at efficient psychological interventions for their reduction, we present this report on a professional experience

that presents a proposal of psychological intervention that is brief and developed into a psychological support service by a federal university with the students in the nursery course. In literature, this course is presented as a graduation with the high incidence of mental health problems among students (Ansolin, Rocha, Santos, & Dal Pozzo, 2015; Borine, Wanderley, & Bassitt, 2015; Carleto, Moura, Santos, & Pedrosa, 2018).

### INTERVENTION PROPOSAL

The psychological intervention with university classmates in the Nursing course described here was named "Academic Experience Workshop", and it was advertised by means of e-mail to the nursing students. Eight meetings were realized. Each meeting lasted 2 hours that were conducted in the university premises by two undergraduates almost at the end of their psychology courses. They were supported by a professor who was a psychologist with clinical experience. The activities that were proposed in the meetings of the workshop were based on behavioral, analytical theories (Borges & Cassas, 2012).

The meetings were structured into three moments: a) warm up - a moment when the participants have the opportunity to express their dissatisfactions with the help of the introduced contents from previous meetings or from the assigned homework, and in this context, the therapists gave brief speeches in order to stimulate discussions and amplify the suggestions for strategies provided by the group itself, which benefited group union and friendship among participants; b) Intervention – based on the demands presented by the group, (for example: anxiety, procrastination, social skills) the interventions were outlined. In the interventions, researchers worked with materials, techniques, and practical exercises in order to amplify the repertoire of strategies to handle the challenges of the academic environment; and c) homework - at the end of every meeting and the workshop students who were provided with a homework task so that the participants could further experience the discussed contents of the workshop along the week and share their experiences in the next meeting.

The interventions were realized in accordance with the needs of the group, and the researchers employed techniques for social skills, relaxation and anxiety control, study guidance, and activities for group cooperation, behavioral role-playing, mindfulness exercises, and other activities described in illustration 1. All the activities were created by the author. All exceptions will be duly reported.

#### Gathering of data concerning the intervention

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Espírito Santo (decision number 2.734.299). All the participants signed a free informed consent term in order to authorize the use of results

from this intervention for the purposes of scientific production, with the guarantee of confidentiality regarding their identity. The participants of this study were 16 university students from the second term in the nursing course, who attended the same class. However, only nine participants answered the instruments in the beginning (*on-line*, at the moment our registration into the workshops) and at the end (on site, on the last day of the workshop), therefore the presented data referred to the students who answered the instruments and the pre and post test. All nine participants were female, the average age was 19.3 years ( $Dp = 1,41$ ), did not work and possessed family income of up to three minimum wages.

In this intervention, researchers used as instruments, the Self-reporting Questionnaire - SRQ-20 (Santos, Araújo, De Sousa, & Silva, 2011) And the Scale of Psychological Well-being - SPW (Machado, Bandeira, & Pawlowski, 2013). The SRQ-20 was developed for the discovery and assessment of symptoms considered not psychotic, common mental disorders (CMD), by means of a list of symptoms such as insomnia, lack of energy, irritability, bad memory, difficulty to concentrate, and somatic problems. The instrument is provided with 20 items, with two possibilities for answers, "yes" or "no". After seven positive answers for females, individuals are considered to be in a context of risk for the development of TMC (Santos et al., 2011).

The SPW, in turn, is equipped with 36 items answered in a 6-point likert scale that ranges from "totally disagree" (1) and "totally agree" (6), which measures the dimensions of psychological well-being: a) positive relations with others: being in relationships that are embracing, safe, intimate, and satisfactory; b) Autonomy: self determination, independence, and the capacity to assess personal experience according to own criteria; c) command over environment: to have the competence to handle the environment in order to satisfy needs and personal values; d) personal growth: feeling a continuous personal development and being open to new experiences; e) the meaning of life: to have a sense of direction, purpose, and objectives in life; and f) self acceptance: positive attitude regarding oneself and acceptance of the multiple aspects of one's personality. The higher the score the greater the psychological well-being (Machado et al., 2013).

The analysis of the data was realized considering the criteria for correction of the instruments, according to what was indicated by the authors (Machado et al., 2003 and Santos et al., 2011). Later on, the data were submitted to statistical analysis, what a comparison of averages and standard deviations, before and after the intervention.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the pre-test, 88.9% of the participants presented physical and emotional symptoms are related to CMD,

**Illustration 1** Table with the description of the procedures by session.

Session	Procedures
1st Session	Presentation of the workshop proposal; activity for introduction of the participants; round table on the mental health of university students: stress and social support; activity for further discoveries concerning individual demands; agreement on the rules of the group (“group contract”); signing of the consent term for the use of data in scientific productions.
2nd Session	Round table on the ranking of demands individually pointed out: (1) stress and anxiety; (2) quality of mental health; (3) study guidance; (4) social skills; and (5) family conflicts; selection of the theme for the next meeting; homework: registration protocol of stress and anxiety.
3rd Session	Stretching and breathing exercises; technique for mindful attention “chocolate meditation” (William & Penman, 2012); discussion on techniques; homework discussion (situations when students feel the most anxious); identification of new demand, “procrastination”; homework: mindful attention concerning activities realized during the day.
4th Session	Homework discussion; round table on “procrastination”; practical exercise on procrastination (things you tend to put off and what prevents you from doing such things); reflections on the practical exercise; homework: observe the obstacles to the realization of everyday life tasks.
5th Session	Discussion on homework; presentation of slides on anxiety and procrastination; homework: read material on the principles of time management (adapted from: <a href="http://psicotema-esbf.blogspot.com.br/2006/12/principios-da-gesto-do-tempo.html">http://psicotema-esbf.blogspot.com.br/2006/12/principios-da-gesto-do-tempo.html</a> ) and try to apply the principles during the week.
6th Session	Homework discussion; theoretical presentation all social skills and practical exercise: behavioral role-playing (Caballo, 2003); discussion on the perception of the participants all the activities are realized so far.
7th Session	Theoretical presentation on social skills and practical exercise: behavioral role-playing (Caballo, 2003); discussion on the perceptions of the participants on the activities realized so far.
8th Session	Workshop assessment; completion of the post test instruments; acknowledgements; end of workshop celebration.

**Table 1** Comparison of the averages of the SRQ-20 and of the SPW in the pre and post test.

Phase	SRQ-20		SPW	
	M	DP	M	DP
Pre-test	12,11	3,43	24,97	1,22
Post-test	6	2,44	29,34	1,17

**Table 2** Comparison of the averages of the dimensions of the SPW in the pre and post-test.

Dimension SPW	Pre-test		Post-test	
	M	DP	M	DP
Positive relationships with others	3,8	1,2	5,16	0,87
Autonomy	4,33	1,23	4,16	1,02
Command over environment	2,83	0,69	4,16	0,82
Personal growth	5,83	0,78	5,83	0,25
Meaning of life	4,5	0,77	5,5	0,53
Self-acceptance	4,83	0,80	5	0,54

and, after participation in the workshop, only 22.2% of the participants kept on displaying such symptoms, according to data from the SRQ-20. Table 1 presents the assessment of the nursery undergraduates before and after participation in the academic experience workshop.

The data described in Table 1 hint at a slight improvement in the psychological well-being of the group after the intervention, as well as a significant decrease in the symptoms of CMD, which might be due to the activities developed during the workshop that led to learning new strategies for adaptation to the academic context. Therefore, it is possible to consider that during the intervention, the participants developed new repertoires for facing stressing situations, which might have probably contributed to the reduction of the symptoms that were initially reported intensely, also according with what was indicated by other works in the area (Carlotto et al., 2015; Soares & Del Prette, 2015; Tomás et al., 2014). Despite these favorable results, some participants still kept on presenting risks for the development of CMD after participation in the workshop. Table two presents the data obtained from each dimension of the SPW also and the pre and post-test.

The increase in the averages of the SPW was more significant in the dimensions of “positive relations with others” and “command over environment”. Concerning the improvement of the 1<sup>st</sup> dimension, it was possible to observe that, because they were students attending the same class, therapists observed an amplification of the social support of the participants of the workshop. In every session, participants started to share more personal experiences with the group, while demonstrating the construction of a relation of trust and intimacy that might explain the increase in this dimension. Social support might be regarded as a facilitating aspect of the integration of the participants into the academic environment, according to what was pointed out by some authors (Tomás et al., 2014; Carlotto et al., 2015). Yet, the increase in the 2<sup>nd</sup> dimension might be explained by the diverse strategies adopted in the workshop for the management of stressors and the development of skills, which might have contributed to the increase in the competence to manage the environment. However, the dimensions “autonomy” and “personal growth” did not present an increase after the participation.

The offer of this workshop as a service or student support at the university became an intervention of educational psychology related to the direct approach to students’ psychological problems.

Thus, a relevant initiative concerning opportunities to discuss stressors in the academic environment, on the students’ expectations regarding the course, as well as strategies that might be developed to facilitate adaptation to the new environment (Ramos et al., 2018).

Due to the fact that the participants are in the initial phases of the course, the workshop focused on

the process of initial adjustment to higher education, while providing an amplification of strategies for facing the situations that are experienced individually and collectively, according to what was pointed out by other works in the area (Carlotto et al., 2015; Hirsch et al., 2015; Oliveira et al., 2014). However, there were other symptoms of mental disorder in part of the sample of the intervention, probably linked to other factors related to mental health in higher education (Arinõ & Bardagi, 2018), that were not directly approached in the intervention.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Entrance in the academic context poses different challenges to students and they might present symptoms of common mental disorders due to excessive preoccupations or the absence of a repertoire in order to handle some events that are perceived as stressors at the university. Therefore, it becomes necessary to help students develop new ways to face the challenges that are present in this context. In this sense, it is up to educational psychologists in higher education to propose such interventions.

The intervention described here, a brief workshop that was based on analytical behavioral benchmarks, who are capable of reducing significantly the symptoms of psychological illness and at the same time increase well-being among the participant students. New interventions might be proposed with the university public as well as new investigations that assess the duration of the long-term effects obtained here.

Psychological assistance to university students becomes, thus, and important measure to be adopted by higher education institutions in order to develop in their students the necessary skills for adaptation to the academic environment, and contribute to a decrease in evasion, as well as to an improvement of the mental health of students.

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