



IMPACTS AND STRATEGIES EXPERIENCED BY NURSING STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to understand nursing students' experience in relation to social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic. **Method:** this is a qualitative study, based on the subject's autobiographical and narrative method. Data collection took place in 2021, through semi-structured interviews, with 29 nursing undergraduate students from a university in the interior of São Paulo selected for convenience. **Results:** the 29 participants were aged between 20 and 33 years old, 22 were between 20 and 23 years old, and only one was male, and 12 of them were in the fourth year of the course, nine in the second year, and eight in the third year. Students experienced countless situations that were different from what they expected, as, upon entering college, their concerns were related to their academic performance and professional future. However, during the pandemic, situations arose with the potential to directly impact their mental health, making it necessary to make adaptations to better address issues related to social distancing and maintaining their psychological well-being. **Final considerations:** change in routine led undergraduate students to look for different ways to better cope with distancing and, thus, avoid harm to mental health.

Keywords: Social Mental Health. Students Nursing. Psychosocial Impact. COVID-19. Physical Distancing.

INTRODUCTION

After the first record of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome infection, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, cause of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in December 2019, the world was experiencing a pandemic that had claimed thousands of victims⁽¹⁾. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), considered by the International Health Regulations (IHR) the highest level of alert⁽²⁾.

As it is an acute respiratory infection, the virus spreads mainly through respiratory secretions, droplets and direct contact with infected patients. Given this, the SARS-CoV-2 virus stands out for its ability to be transmitted through direct person-to-person contact⁽³⁾.

So that the pandemic could finally be

controlled, mass vaccination was a great advance for science, which is seen as one of the most effective and lowest cost-benefit public policies used in disease control and prevention⁽²⁾. WHO data indicate that, until June 2, 2023, the number of doses of vaccines applied was equal to 513,329,718⁽⁴⁾.

Combined with vaccination, the best way to prevent the disease is to prevent exposure to the virus and social distancing, which acts as one of the tools against COVID-19, preventing the spread of the disease and protecting against the harmful effects of the virus⁽⁵⁾. Among the measures advised by the WHO were restricting contact between humans, avoiding events that lead to crowds, suspending work that was not considered essential and closing schools and universities⁽¹⁾.

With the restriction of contact and the suspension of in-person activities at universities,

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undergraduate students were forced to migrate to the remote teaching model, causing reflections and doubts about the new reality and uncertainties about the future, which had consequences on emotional competence⁽¹⁾.

With the impact of quarantine and fear of new illnesses, people's mental health was affected, especially in students who are experiencing their time at university⁽⁵⁾, which is considered a long-awaited moment by most. Feelings such as fear, sadness, guilt, fury and anxiety came to the surface when faced with the suspicion of infection or even COVID-19 diagnosis. Such sensations can evolve into more serious conditions, such as panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression⁽⁶⁾.

In addition to social distancing having generated dysfunctional feelings in undergraduate students, the organization of teaching itself, carried out on an emergency basis, affected students, such as lack of access to necessary technologies, task overload, dissatisfaction with the new modality and lack of psychological support⁽⁷⁾.

Much has been studied about the psychosocial impacts on undergraduate students after the COVID pandemic⁽⁸⁻¹⁰⁾, but the way this undergraduate student dealt with distancing was a gap identified. It is understood that knowing this way of coping will help in deepening reflections on these experiences in the long term. Therefore, the study aimed to understand nursing students' experience in relation to social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, descriptive study, with a cross-sectional, exploratory design, whose report preparation was guided by the CONsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research (COREQ).

The object of study was to investigate the understanding of nursing students at a university in São Paulo regarding the perception of their experiences during social distancing after a year and a half of the coronavirus pandemic. Students enrolled in the second to fourth year of the nursing course in 2021 participated in this research. Those entering the course in 2021 were not included because data collection began one

month after they entered the course.

The project was approved by the proposing institution's Research Ethics Committee, under Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration (CAAE - *Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética*) 31479920.8.0000.5411.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, guided by a script prepared by the authors, consisting of two parts. The first addresses sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, year of graduation), and the second consists of the guiding question: what has your life experience been like in a year and a half of social distancing due to the coronavirus pandemic?

It was based on the autobiographical framework and subjects' narrative, allowing participants to narrate their experience around the established object of study⁽¹¹⁾. This stage also favored the collection procedure, as researchers were able to improve their approach.

We opted for convenience sampling using the snowball technique, being a non-probabilistic sampling that has reference chains designed from people who share some characteristics that are of interest to the research or know of others who have them⁽¹²⁾. The interviews took place remotely via Google Meet, being recorded and later transcribed. The researchers began by explaining the research's objective together with the Informed Consent Form (ICF). By signing the ICF, they agree to participate in the study.

The interviews took place from July 2021 to April 2022. Students who entered in 2021 maintained the inclusion criteria. After the interview, reports were transcribed, and participants were identified with the letter "S" followed by the number that represented the order of inclusion in the study.

The study of information was based on hermeneutic-dialectic thinking, whose interpretative reflection is based on praxis and the search for knowledge and critical analysis of reality⁽¹³⁾. Dissimilarities and differences were developed in the investigation through the framing of the literature and the research. In relation to research into language, facts, culture and symbols, based on contradictory nuclei with the intention of producing a critical interpretation, instruments are developed,

understanding that analysis of meanings needs to be inserted into the basis of social practices and highlighting the context/historical link of speeches, actions and relationships⁽¹⁴⁾.

Articulation of hermeneutics with dialectics has been widely used in qualitative studies. It assumes that there is no impartial observer and relates in an intertwined manner, whereas hermeneutics is based on consensus, with dialectics emphasizing contrast and criticism⁽¹⁴⁾.

Text skimming and exhaustive readings of the narratives' content were carried out. Three steps were established for arranging the information, such as data ordering, classification and final analysis, which included classification of interviewees' statements, components of empirical categories, horizontal and vertical syntheses, and comparison between information, grouping convergent, divergent and complementary ideas. Final analysis was guided by thematic analysis⁽¹⁴⁾. At this stage, all authors participated.

RESULTS

A total of 29 undergraduate students participated in this study and, of these, 28 were female. Regarding age, 22 were between 20 and 23 years old, two were between 18 and 19, and five were between 24 and 33 years old. Furthermore, 12 of them were in the fourth year, nine in the second year, and eight in the third year.

Analysis of interview data made it possible to identify three categories, which will be described below:

Feelings related to teaching during social distancing

Feelings related to social distancing during the pandemic among undergraduate students have proven to be a relevant issue in the process of coping with this moment. That said, some students reported that entering college is considered a long-awaited moment with great expectations, but, with the arrival of the pandemic and the change of the teaching model to online platforms, there were frustrations regarding the first contact with college that had been desired for so long.

There was a time when I no longer had hope of things going back to normal [...] along with the frustration of having entered college and not having experienced that "freshman" time, this was the part that impacted me the most, the not living the big dream of studying nursing at UNESP. (S16)

I kept thinking about what the first and second year of my degree would have been like if there hadn't been this pandemic; I think about how much experience we lost. (S21)

In relation to college, it was very difficult for me, because, when I entered, I had all the experience of looking for a house and changing cities, [...] I started to wonder if I had done the right thing by entering now. (S22)

For some students, concerns about the effectiveness of remote teaching stood out. There were reports that demonstrated that this new Distance Education study platform was discouraging for learning, and such thoughts led some students to question whether the quality of education offered would be the same compared to previous years when there was no social distancing.

I'm worried about how much this will affect my training, because a year and a half of being exposed to thousands of pieces of information that we can't absorb effectively is frustrating. (S7)

I was thinking, "Will I, with these online classes, learn as well as in previous years that had everything in person?". So, there was a lot of this thought of doubting, of not knowing if it was going to work, if I should continue, if it would harm my knowledge. (S22)

Impacts on nursing students' lives during distancing

The psychosocial impact faced during the period of social distancing showed that, for nursing students, challenges arose, and adaptations and the creation of strategies to cope with the new scenario and efforts to preserve physical and psychological well-being were necessary.

Being a health student can be considered an advantage in many situations, however, during the pandemic, many students found themselves in a position of reference for other people, but did not consider themselves prepared for it. In addition to the challenges related to the health

area, there was a perception that women have responsibilities linked to household chores and childcare, which are mixed with student liferesponsibilities.

I think the nursing course's reality is different compared to others, because most of us are women, and as women, we end up having housework, those who have children have to take care of children and many things to take care of. (S24)

During this time of isolation here in the republic, I was the only reference health professional, so, whenever something happened there, they spoke to me, but imagine the weight of that, because we get scared. There were panic attacks within the republic and I was the reference, and we receive a lot of information as students, and we don't have time to process it. (S10)

The physical and mental exhaustion of graduating in health and closely monitoring the overload in the public system are strong stressors for me. (S11)

Some students also reflected on taking care of themselves and the need to be prepared to serve, help and be a source of truthful news for other people who also needed support. As a result, students felt pressured to be examples and models of safety.

Being on a health course is also a very big responsibility, because you have to take care of yourself and also take care of others, and it was a very bad experience. (S6)

When someone asked me something, I felt guilty for not knowing how to answer. It seemed like it was my obligation, but I couldn't handle it. (S28)

Strategies used to cope with social distancing

Due to the diverse experiences during the period of distancing, undergraduate students had to find strategies that would help them cope with this period. Many reported that organization and planning were essential while they were at home, and they still needed to carry out college activities. Additionally, doing things that were out of the ordinary were also protective.

Regarding college, I needed to organize myself a lot to carry out activities on the correct days and attend classes [...] I divided my day into schedules and organized what I had to do at those times and then did something to make myself more relaxed.

(S28)

I adopted a cat and she was my salvation. She was the one who made me want to go home and take care of her. She gave me affection, slept with me, so she was the one who really helped me face this moment. (S19)

I tried to stay as organized as possible, because that snowball didn't form. So, one strategy I had was this, in my diary I marked everything I had, and on my cell phone, it is arranged by time, and I'll cross them off one by one. So, by organization, I didn't have this problem. (S20)

Other students said that the strategy used was the simple fact of turning off the television and not being aware of the news that was constantly about the reason for their anguish: the pandemic.

Not watching news on TV all the time was something that also helped, because the television was on all the time and the news was always about deaths or new cases, and this made me distressed to see that it was never getting better. It seemed like it would be a never-ending thing. (S28)

Turning off the news a little bit was a good ally, because I was at home, so there wasn't much I could do. (S27)

And I try not to watch this news so much anymore, because it was causing me a certain discomfort. It was a coping strategy, even though it was bad, because we become alienated, but it was a strategy that I used. (S03)

Human contact is a protective form in times of distress. The undergraduate students highlighted that moments of conversation and venting with people who were going through the same situation were factors that helped their psychological well-being. Group activity is important for coping with the consequences of social distancing.

In terms of strategy, the only thing that ended up relieving me was talking and venting to people I trust. Having someone to tell you that everything is going to be okay or someone who was there. (S01)

Group internships helped me a lot to face this moment, being able to be there with people and share their anxieties was a protective factor. (S03)

Starting to talk to people who were experiencing the same thing as me helped a lot. (S24)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that social distancing was an indicator of major changes and impacts in undergraduate students' lives. Through the narratives, it was possible to identify different feelings, such as frustration at having passed the entrance exam at this time, concern about the new teaching model, anxiety about not knowing what the outcome of the pandemic would be like, fear of contracting the disease, anguish and worries. Students who reported frustration pointed out that the reason was that they had passed the entrance exam, a much-awaited moment, and due to the pandemic, they were unable to experience entering college as they would have liked.

A study carried out in Australia with undergraduate students pre- and post-COVID-19 identified that first-year students experienced less belonging at university and greater loneliness during the pandemic. These facts showed that students do not enroll in university just to learn, but to learn together⁽¹⁵⁾.

Other reports raised concerns about the quality of teaching that would be offered as well as concern about the remote teaching model, which would be new for undergraduate students and professors. A study carried out in Italy, which sought to identify the impact of distance learning during the pandemic, found that 55% of undergraduate students reported significant impairment in concentration and learning skills when participating in online classes⁽¹⁶⁾.

Furthermore, it is known that efforts during the pandemic to start the virtual teaching model caused stress and uncertainty due to the lack of experience with the model and problems with the internet⁽¹⁷⁾. A study carried out at a public university in Paraná revealed that inequality of access and use of information and communication technologies were linked to students' lack of motivation in accessing the material provided by professors and participating in online classes⁽¹⁸⁾.

Furthermore, concerns revolved around practical activities and doubts about when they would have the opportunity to carry out them, as they identify these activities as essential and indispensable in training. That said, even though we know that moving away from in-person

activities would be the best option at the moment, still there are concerns about the possibility of entering the job market with limited skills⁽¹⁹⁾.

As health students, we know that there is great concern about the skills and competencies acquired during graduation, and this happens because there are responsibilities in caring for others. Some students raised concerns about the responsibility that surrounds them, as they often end up being people of reference for others. Unpreparedness, contact with something new for the first time and sudden entry into the unknown can generate feelings of anxiety and insecurity⁽²⁰⁾.

A scoping review sought to analyze the COVID-19 pandemic repercussions on nursing training, pointing out as a positive fact that professors need to use dynamic methodologies, which increased engagement and valued student concentration. The use of recorded video classes made it easier to repeat content as many times as necessary, providing better learning opportunities due to multiple accesses, and carrying out activities through virtual simulations allowed students to be closer to practice. In negative repercussions, psychological issues were highlighted, such as stress, fear, anxiety and a feeling of helplessness⁽²¹⁾.

A study carried out with *Universidade Federal Fluminense* students pointed out that taking a health course increases the susceptibility to the development of mental disorders by 16%, a characteristic that was identified as a stressful factor for the undergraduate students in this study⁽²²⁾.

Another reality highlighted is that of women in nursing, and in this study and in the literature, there is a predominance of females in the work dedicated to care⁽¹⁰⁾. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that the predominance of women in nursing comes from historical and cultural issues, dealing with daily activities in their homes and, in this context, with graduation. The sum of all these burdens leads to the emergence of psychological changes such as stress and anxiety⁽²³⁾.

The literature also points out that undergraduate students, during the coronavirus pandemic, presented feelings of fear, worries, exhaustion and anguish due to difficulties in

dealing with changes that have occurred in studies, in coexistence, at work, in life and also in activity overload^(23,24).

With the emergence of several challenges faced by undergraduate students, the use of different strategies helped in coping with social distancing. Organization and planning strategies were highlighted by most students as facilitators of the learning process through remote teaching, in addition to minimizing the stressful effects of the pandemic^(5,24).

In this regard, a study carried out with 275 undergraduate students at a Brazilian university revealed that, among coping strategies during social distancing due to the pandemic, students used the escape and avoidance strategy more frequently in order to create an emotional distance from the situation experienced at that moment⁽²⁵⁾.

Remote classes as well as the use of digital platforms were widely used as strategies to minimize difficulties arising from this context. Despite the difficulties, 55% of undergraduate students at universities in Bahia reported that they were able to adapt well to the remote teaching model. However, they also mentioned that distancing had an impact on anxiety and, therefore, the majority, even when adapted, preferred in-person teaching⁽²⁶⁾.

Likewise, a Peruvian study identified that emotional fatigue during the pandemic period was also a factor that made this adaptation difficult. Of the 232 Peruvian undergraduate students, more than half showed high levels of emotional fatigue with symptoms of tension, insomnia, headaches, anxiety, stress, tension and frustration, which had an impact on university life⁽²⁷⁾.

Information on social media and news

broadcasts about the progress of the pandemic and updates on the growing number of victims of coronavirus were identified as a stressful factor and cause psychological distress. To alleviate the stress caused by so much distressing information, students sought alternatives and, by avoiding reading or watching news that caused distress, realized that, as simple as they were, they contributed positively and showed great potential for promoting mental health⁽¹⁰⁾.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results of this study allowed us to understand the different feelings and impacts caused by the pandemic in the lives of nursing students at a university in São Paulo. The narratives demonstrated that students experienced situations that generated a clash of realities, because, upon entering college, concerns would be regarding their future as a professional and academic performance. However, during the pandemic, situations came to light that required adaptations to cope with and the constant concern about maintaining psychological well-being.

Furthermore, it highlighted how change in routine led, in different ways, all of them to look for ways to face the pandemic and, thus, avoid harm to their mental health. However, the limitations of this study are related to the fact that the data was collected from undergraduate students from just one course.

However, the need for psychological support for undergraduate students and the participation of the mental health area in crisis committees to combat pandemics is evident.

IMPACTOS E ESTRATÉGIAS VIVENCIADAS POR ESTUDANTES DE ENFERMAGEM NA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

RESUMO

Objetivo: compreender a experiência de graduandos de enfermagem em relação ao distanciamento social durante a pandemia de coronavírus. **Método:** estudo qualitativo, fundamentado no método autobiográfico e narrativa do sujeito. A coleta dos dados ocorreu no ano de 2021, mediante entrevistas semiestruturadas, com 29 graduandos do curso de enfermagem de uma universidade no interior de São Paulo selecionados por conveniência. **Resultados:** os 29 participantes tinham idade entre 20 e 33 anos, sendo que 22 tinham entre 20 e 23 anos, só um era do sexo masculino, e 12 deles estavam no quarto ano do curso, nove, no segundo ano, e oito, no terceiro ano. Os alunos experienciaram inúmeras situações diferentes do que esperavam, pois, ao entrarem na faculdade, suas preocupações eram referentes ao desempenho acadêmico e futuro profissional. Porém, no decorrer da pandemia, surgiram situações com potencial de impactar diretamente sua saúde mental,

sendo necessário realizar adaptações com vistas a um melhor enfrentamento de questões relacionadas ao distanciamento social e à manutenção do seu bem-estar psicológico. **Considerações finais:** a mudança de rotina levou os graduandos a buscarem diferentes formas de melhor enfrentar o distanciamento e, assim, evitar prejuízos para a saúde mental.

Palavras-chave Saúde Mental. Estudantes de Enfermagem. Impacto Psicossocial. COVID-19. Distanciamento Físico.

IMPACTOS Y ESTRATEGIAS EXPERIMENTADAS POR ESTUDIANTES DE ENFERMERÍA EN LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

RESUMEN

Objetivo: comprender la experiencia de estudiantes de enfermería con relación al aislamiento social durante la pandemia de coronavirus. **Método:** estudio cualitativo, fundamentado en el método autobiográfico y narrativa del sujeto. La recolección de los datos ocurrió en el año 2021, a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, con 29 estudiantes del curso de enfermería de una universidad en el interior de São Paulo/Brasil seleccionados por conveniencia. **Resultados:** los 29 participantes tenían entre 20 y 33 años, siendo que 22 tenían entre 20 y 23 años, y solo uno de sexo masculino, y 12 de ellos estaban en el cuarto año del curso, nueve, en el segundo año, y ocho, en el tercer año. Los estudiantes experimentaron muchas situaciones diferentes de las que esperaban, pues, al ingresar a la universidad, sus preocupaciones se referían al rendimiento académico y futuro profesional. Sin embargo, en el transcurso de la pandemia, surgieron situaciones con potencial de impactar directamente su salud mental, siendo necesario realizar adaptaciones con vistas a un mejor enfrentamiento de cuestiones relacionadas al aislamiento social y al mantenimiento de su bienestar psicológico. **Consideraciones finales:** el cambio de rutina llevó a los estudiantes a buscar diferentes formas de enfrentar mejor el aislamiento y, así, evitar perjuicios para la salud mental.

Palabras clave: Salud Mental. Estudiantes de Enfermería. Impacto Psicossocial. COVID-19. Aislamiento Físico.

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