

## BURNOUT SYNDROME IN NURSING STUDENTS

Síndrome de burnout em acadêmicos de enfermagem

Síndrome de burnout en estudiantes de enfermería

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to determine the prevalence of Burnout Syndrome in undergraduate students in the health area, especially in the Nursing course at a private higher education institution in the Federal District. **Method:** this is a quantitative, descriptive study through the application of two questionnaires: a sociodemographic and educational one and the Maslach Burnout Inventory - Students Survey (MBI-SS). **Results:** 356 nursing students participated, who did not have Burnout Syndrome, but obtained high levels of depersonalization and low academic effectiveness. Academics in the third year of the course were the most susceptible to developing that pathology. **Conclusion:** new reflections and discussions about the academic conception of Nursing students is reinforced, especially the academics who are in the middle of the course.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Psychological burnout; Nursing; Nursing students; Mental health; University.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** determinar a prevalência de Síndrome de Burnout em estudantes de graduação da área da saúde, em especial do curso de Enfermagem de uma instituição privada de ensino superior do Distrito Federal. **Método:** trata-se de estudo quantitativo, descritivo por meio da aplicação de dois questionários: um sociodemográfico e educacional e o *Maslach Burnout Inventory - Students Survey*. **Resultados:** participaram 356 estudantes de enfermagem, os quais não apresentaram a Síndrome de Burnout, mas obtiveram índices altos de despersonalização e baixa eficácia acadêmica. Acadêmicos do terceiro ano do curso foram os mais suscetíveis a desenvolver tal patologia. **Conclusão:** reforça-se a necessidade de novas reflexões e discussões acerca da concepção acadêmica dos estudantes de Enfermagem, em especial os acadêmicos que se encontram na metade do curso.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Esgotamento psicológico; Enfermagem; Estudantes de enfermagem; Saúde mental; Universidade.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** determinar la prevalencia del Síndrome de Burnout en estudiantes de en el área de la salud, especialmente en el curso de Enfermería en una institución privada de educación superior en el Distrito Federal. **Método:** se trata de un estudio cuantitativo y descriptivo mediante la aplicación de dos cuestionarios: uno sociodemográfico y educativo y el *Maslach Burnout Inventory - Students Survey*.

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**Resultados:** participaron 356 estudiantes de enfermería, que no tenían síndrome de Burnout, pero obtuvieron altos niveles de despersonalización y baja efectividad académica. Los académicos en el tercer año del curso fueron los más susceptibles a desarrollar dicha patología. **Conclusión:** se refuerza la necesidad de nuevas reflexiones y discusiones sobre la concepción académica de los estudiantes de enfermería, especialmente los académicos que están en la mitad del curso.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Agotamiento psicológico; Enfermería; Estudiantes de enfermería; Salud mental; Universidad.

## INTRODUCTION

When entering university, the student is faced with changes that require an effort of adjustment from the individual.<sup>1</sup> The accumulation of academic tasks, social and personal demands, as well as expectations and concerns about the professional future may lead to high levels of anxiety and stress. This may interfere with the dynamics of studies and become a hindrance to both student and professional performance.<sup>2</sup>

It is noteworthy that higher education institutions should pay attention to the mental health of health students, especially because the constant contact with life and death, with pain and suffering of patients and family members may contribute to an increase in the emotional exhaustion of these students, in addition to culminating in the distancing from their studies and in the negative self-perception of their own academic and professional efficacy.<sup>3</sup>

It is believed that health area students are more susceptible to college stress, because their academic activities require direct contact with sick people and their suffering, making them more predisposed to physical and mental exhaustion.<sup>4</sup> And among these students, it is believed that nursing students, because they live more directly with patients and family members, are more susceptible to a disease called Burnout Syndrome.<sup>5</sup>

Burnout Syndrome among healthcare students can be characterized as an emotional stress related to occupational/academic activities that have direct and constant contact with human beings.<sup>6</sup> Three factors are essential for the diagnosis of this syndrome, such as: emotional exhaustion (decrease of emotional energy due to excessive demand of labor/academic activities); depersonalization (sense of emotional insensitivity to the people with whom they live); and low personal accomplishment (feelings of low self-esteem and low academic efficacy).<sup>7</sup>

The identification of the Burnout Syndrome and its possible influence on the lives of healthcare students is fundamental, so that strategies to face the problem can be adopted from the initial stages of graduation, thus favoring the professional training process.

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In view of the above, the present study aimed to determine the prevalence of Burnout Syndrome in healthcare undergraduate students, especially in the Nursing course of a private higher education institution.

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In view of the above, the present study aimed to determine the prevalence of Burnout Syndrome in healthcare undergraduate students, especially in the Nursing course of a private higher education institution.

## METHOD

A quantitative, descriptive study was conducted between October and November 2019 in a private university institution in the Federal District.

Inclusion criteria were: students regularly enrolled in the Nursing course of the institution; being over 18 years old on the day of data collection and agreeing to participate in the research by signing the Termo de Consentimento Livre Esclarecido (TCLE). We excluded those who refused to sign the ICF, who were not present on the day of data collection, or who felt uncomfortable participating in the research.

The non-probability convenience sampling method was used, so that the research subjects were selected according to their presence and availability at the place and time of data collection.

To make data collection possible, two instruments were used: a social-demographic and educational questionnaire, and the questionnaire called Maslach Burnout Inventory - Students Survey (MBI-SS) - Maslach Burnout Inventory for Students, cross-culturally adapted version Portugal-Brazil.<sup>8</sup>

Maslach's scale is a self-applied Likert type scale, in which the individual evaluates the frequency in which he/she feels a certain group of feelings expressed in phrases arranged in a table with the option to mark the alternative that fits best (0 - never; 1 - once a year or less; 2 - once a month or less; 3 - sometime a month; 4 - once a week; 5 - a few times a week and; 6 - every day).<sup>9</sup>

The scale assesses three factors - emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or disbelief, and academic efficacy. A result with high values of emotional exhaustion (equal to or higher than 27 points) and depersonalization/disbelief (equal to or higher than 10 points) and low values of academic efficacy (equal to or lower than 33) is an indicator of Burnout.<sup>9-11</sup>

After the study was authorized by the Research Ethics Committee, the coordination of the institution's Nursing course was contacted in order to obtain permission to access the classrooms of each academic semester, in the morning and evening periods of the two campuses of the institution. Soon after, the researchers contacted the course professors in order to set specific dates to apply the questionnaires in each class, so as not to affect the academic calendar and schedule of the subjects. On the stipulated date, they explained the research objectives to the students, made themselves available to answer any questions, presented the Free Informed Consent Form for later signing, and then applied the questionnaires.

The data were stored using a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel format and later transcribed for descriptive analysis using the SPSS program, version 22.0. The chi-square test was used to compare the percentages between groups in addition to the analysis of variance followed by Tukey comparisons. Thus, the significance value was 0.05, equivalent to 95% confidence.

The present research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under No. 20086219.0.0000.0023, following the ethical principles governing research with human beings determined by Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council.

## RESULTS

A total of 356 nursing students regularly enrolled in the institution participated.

Next, the sociodemographic and academic data of the research subjects will be presented, according to Table 1.

**Table 1** - Sociodemographic and academic data of the research subjects by gender, age, race, source of income, family income, marital status, maternity/paternity, school year, study shift. Brasília, DF, Brazil, 2019

	Variables	N (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	61 (17,1)
	Female	295 (82,9)
<b>Age</b>	18 to 20 years	134 (37,6)
	21 to 24 years	138 (38,8)
	25 to 28 years	41 (11,5)
	29 to 32 years	12 (3,4)
	Over 32 years old	31 (8,7)
<b>Race</b>	White	163 (45,9)
	Brown	147 (41,4)
	Black	38 (10,7)
	Yellow	07 (2,0)
<b>Source of Income</b>	Family	244 (68,6)
	University Aid	16 (4,5)
	Own Work	72 (20,2)
	Undeclared	05 (1,4)
<b>Family Income</b>	Less than 1 minimum wage	07 (2,0)
	Between 1 and 2 minimum wages	65 (18,3)
	Between 3 and 4 minimum wages	124 (34,8)
	Acima de 4 salários mínimos	155 (43,5)
	Undeclared	05 (1,4)
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	307 (86,2)
	Married	45 (12,7)
	Divorced	03 (0,8)
	Widower	01 (0,3)
<b>Has children</b>	No	306 (86,0)
	Yes	48 (13,5)
	Undeclared	02 (0,6)
<b>School Year</b>	First Year	88 (24,7)
	Second Year	78 (21,9)
	Third Year	83 (23,3)
	Fourth Year	71 (19,9)
	Fifth Year	36 (10,2)
<b>Study Shift</b>	Morning	128 (36,0)
	Night	223 (62,6)
	Undeclared	05 (1,4)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>356 (100)</b>

It is observed that most of the students are female (82.9%), young between 18 and 24 years old (76.4%), mostly white (45.9%), single (86.2%), without children (86.0%), with family income from their parents (68.6%), above four minimum wages (43.5%), who are regularly enrolled in evening courses (62.6%). It also showed a homogeneous distribution in the number of students in the first three years of the course and a decrease from the fourth and fifth years of the course.

Next, the mean scores of the general evaluation of Burnout Syndrome among Nursing students will be presented, according to Table 2.

**Table 2** - Overall assessment Burnout Syndrome among nursing students. Brasília, DF, Brazil, 2019

<b>Domain 1: Emotional Exhaustion</b>	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Average</b>
I feel emotionally exhausted in relation to my studies	3,57
I feel exhausted at the end of a day that I have class	4,56
I feel tired when I get up to face another day of class	4,12
Studying and attending classes is a great effort for me	3,59
My studies leave me completely exhausted	3,86
<b>Total</b>	<b>19,70</b>
<b>Domain 2: Disbelief</b>	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Grade</b>
I have become less interested in my studies since I entered this university	2,16
I have become less interested in my studies	2,37
I have been more and more unbelieving of my potential and of the usefulness of my studies	3,17
I question the meaning and importance of my studies	2,70
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,40</b>
<b>Domain 3: Academic Effectiveness</b>	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Grade</b>
I can solve the problems that arise in my studies	4,03
I believe I am effective in contributing to the classes I attend	3,57
I consider myself a good student	3,67
I feel stimulated when I successfully complete my study goal	4,82
I have learned many interesting things in the course of my studies	5,48
During the lessons I feel confident: I perform my tasks effectively	3,80
<b>Total</b>	<b>25,37</b>

The data revealed require special attention because, although the students surveyed did not present scores suggestive of Burnout Syndrome (Emotional Exhaustion  $\geq 27$  points + Disbelief  $\geq 10$  points + Academic Efficacy  $\leq 33$  points), high scores were verified in two of the three dimensions of the scale - Disbelief and Academic Efficacy.

Next, the mean scores referring to the evaluation of the Burnout Syndrome, by domains and questions, among the academic years of the course will be presented, according to Table 3.

**Table 3** - Burnout Syndrome assessment among nursing students, by academic year. Brasília, DF, Brazil, 2019

<b>Domain 1: Emotional Exhaustion</b>					
<b>Questions</b>	<b>1º</b>	<b>2º</b>	<b>3º</b>	<b>4º</b>	<b>5º</b>
I feel emotionally exhausted in relation to my studies	3,77	4,23	4,6	4,3	4,0
I feel exhausted at the end of a day that I have class	4,06	4,73	4,9	4,6	4,8
I feel tired when I get up to face another day of class	3,6	4,11	4,3	4,4	4,6
Studying and attending classes is a great effort for me	4,0	3,5	3,7	3,05	3,75
My studies leave me completely exhausted	3,47	3,65	4,35	4,2	4,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>18,9</b>	<b>20,22</b>	<b>21,85</b>	<b>20,55</b>	<b>21,35</b>

<b>Domain 2: Disbelief</b>					
<b>Questions</b>	<b>1º</b>	<b>2º</b>	<b>3º</b>	<b>4º</b>	<b>5º</b>
I have become less interested in my studies since I entered this university	1,9	2,1	2,4	2,0	2,1
I have become less interested in my studies	2,05	2,4	2,81	2,3	2,4
I have been more and more unbelieving of my potential and of the usefulness of my studies	3,32	3,28	3,34	2,74	3,16
I question the meaning and importance of my studies	2,4	3,0	2,9	2,7	2,5
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,67</b>	<b>10,78</b>	<b>11,45</b>	<b>9,74</b>	<b>10,16</b>
<b>Domain 3: Academic Effectiveness</b>					
<b>Questions</b>	<b>1º</b>	<b>2º</b>	<b>3º</b>	<b>4º</b>	<b>5º</b>
I can solve the problems that arise in my studies	3,9	3,85	4,1	4,45	4,02
I believe I am effective in contributing to the classes I attend	3,5	3,42	3,36	3,92	3,94
I consider myself a good student	3,54	3,55	3,62	4,0	3,9
I feel stimulated when I successfully complete my study goal	4,8	5,0	4,75	4,8	4,7
I have learned many interesting things in the course of my studies	5,5	5,4	5,5	5,6	5,4
During the lessons I feel confident: I perform my tasks effectively	3,72	3,6	3,9	4,0	3,9
<b>Total</b>	<b>24,96</b>	<b>24,82</b>	<b>25,23</b>	<b>26,77</b>	<b>25,86</b>

It was verified that first-year nursing students were less emotionally exhausted than students from other years. Unlike third-year students, who showed higher rates of emotional exhaustion.

In relation to Disbelief, the data revealed that second, third and fifth year students presented scores above 10 points. Once again, third-year students presented a higher disbelief index than the other students.

It was also found that in all years the average score was below 33 points in the Academic Effectiveness domain, which students in the second and first years showed lower scores.

The data revealed that despite the averages presented no high scores in the Emotional Exhaustion domain in any year of the course, Disbelief was manifested among students in the second, third and fifth years of the course, and Academic Efficacy scored below average in all years of the course.

## DISCUSSION

The research data revealed that third-year students are more susceptible to Burnout Syndrome in comparison with students from other years of the nursing course.

These data diverged from research conducted with other nursing students, which indicated that the final periods of the course, which correspond to curricular internships, constitute a stage that can trigger the symptoms of Burnout Syndrome. In addition, the elaboration and presentation of the final course work, the need for critical thinking and quick decision making during direct patient care, as well as the expectations of the job market, make it possible for students in this period of the course to develop this syndrome.<sup>5,12-13</sup>

When comparing the data with students from other courses in the health area, a survey carried out with medical students from three higher education institutions in northern Minas Gerais revealed that students from the first years of

the course presented high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.<sup>14</sup>

The reasons why first year students may develop Burnout may be related to the new academic reality that they will face, the anxiety generated in relation to the chosen career and professional future, as well as personal issues related to social interaction and interpersonal relationships.<sup>15</sup> All these issues can have repercussions on false expectations in relation to the university and, when not met, contribute to the development of feelings of disappointment, demotivation, loss of enthusiasm and frustration, which can lead the student to stress situations and consequently trigger Burnout Syndrome.<sup>16</sup>

Differently from the aforementioned research, the data obtained in this study become important predictors for the discussion of Burnout among college students, especially Nursing students, because it was verified the susceptibility of the syndrome not among students in the initial or final years, but exactly in the middle of the Nursing course.

This reality was also observed in a Portuguese study, which revealed that, despite moderate stress among nursing students, those in the third and fourth years of the course presented intense stress and, consequently, were more prone to develop Burnout Syndrome.<sup>17</sup>

Students in their third year of the course showed the highest rates of emotional exhaustion at the end of the study day, less interested in their studies since entering college, less interested in their studies, and more disbelieving of their potential and the usefulness of their studies, as well as believing that they are less effective in contributing to the classes they attend. Perhaps this could be an important warning for the decrease in student numbers in subsequent years.

And what might cause students in their third year to be more susceptible to Burnout Syndrome? When evaluating the curricular matrix of the Nursing course of the researched institution, it was observed that precisely in the third year

of the course (fifth and sixth semesters) the inclusion of subjects of the professional cycle of the Nursing course occurs - Semiology, Semiotics, Women's Health, Child Health, Adult Health, Mental Health, among others.

In this period of the course, such subjects demand critical thinking from the student, who needs previous knowledge that was covered during the basic disciplines of the course - Anatomy, Physiology, Pathology, among others - and apply it to specific nursing care. It is believed that these issues may be a predictor for increased emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased academic effectiveness.

The concept of critical thinking in nursing consists of a complex process in which the student must incorporate previous knowledge and identify which information is necessary for decision making.<sup>18</sup> Thus, if this student is not able to make this correlation between basic and specific disciplines of the course, it is inferred that an increase in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, decreased academic efficacy and, consequently, the development of Burnout Syndrome may occur.

Therefore, it is necessary to create spaces for self-care in universities so that the academics, and especially nursing students, can recognize when they are in psychological distress related to issues inherent to the university environment and request support when necessary.<sup>19</sup>

The study is limited to a transversal cut in which only the period studied is presented, besides having been applied only in one higher education institution. Thus, it is expected that new studies will be carried out in other scenarios for the deepening of situations that can help in the understanding of this important syndrome in the university context.

## CONCLUSION

In general, the nursing students of that institution did not present scores suggestive of Burnout Syndrome. Although the students did not present emotional exhaustion, academics from the second, third and fifth years of the course presented high averages in the Disbelief domain, besides the fact that all years of the course presented low levels in the Academic Effectiveness domain.

When comparing the students and their respective school years, it was found that third-year students were more susceptible to developing Burnout Syndrome, unlike other studies, which pointed out that students in the initial and final grades presented signs suggestive of this pathology.

In this sense, the findings of this research reinforce the need for new reflections and discussions about the academic conception of nursing students, especially those in the middle of the course. The manifestations of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low professional efficacy of students in this period of training alert teachers and course coordinators to plan and implement actions aimed at minimizing the stress caused by the situations identified during this period, which seem to be associated with the development of Burnout dimensions among nursing students.

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