

## Anxiety signs experienced by nursing undergraduates

Manifestações de ansiedade vivenciadas por estudantes de enfermagem

Manifestaciones de ansiedad vivencias por estudiantes de enfermería

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The study's purpose has been to gain further understanding about the signs of anxiety experienced by nursing undergraduates at a University from the South region of Brazil. **Methods:** It is a descriptive-exploratory research with a qualitative approach, which was carried out with 18 nursing undergraduates, excluding those who did not have an interest in participating. Data collection was performed through a semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was used. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee from the Health Area at *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande (FURG)*, and under the Legal Opinion No. 153/2013. **Results:** After transcription and analysis of the speeches emerged four categories that were discussed separately. **Conclusion:** It is suggested that the professor must have a motivating, knowledge-mobilizing and academic-centered position aiming to support the future professional.

**Descriptors:** Anxiety, nursing undergraduates, superior education.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Conhecer as manifestações de ansiedade vivenciadas pelos estudantes de enfermagem em uma universidade do extremo sul do país. **Método:** Pesquisa qualitativa, exploratória e descritiva, com 18 acadêmicos do curso de graduação em enfermagem, sendo excluídos os que não tiveram interesse em participar. A coleta dos dados foi realizada por meio de uma entrevista semiestruturada. Foi utilizada a análise temática. O projeto foi aprovado pelo Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa da Área da Saúde da FURG, sob parecer nº 153/2013. **Resultados:** Após transcrição e análise das falas emergiram quatro categorias que foram discutidas separadamente. **Conclusão:** Propõe-se que o docente tenha uma postura motivadora, mobilizadora do conhecimento e centrada no acadêmico, a fim de refletir na assistência do futuro profissional.

**Descritores:** Ansiedade, estudantes de enfermagem, ensino superior.

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## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Conocer las manifestaciones de ansiedad vivenciadas por los estudiantes de enfermería en una universidad del extremo sur del país. **Método:** Investigación cualitativa, exploratoria y descriptiva, con 18 académicos del curso de graduación en enfermería, siendo excluidos los que no tuvieron interés en participar. La recolección de los datos se realizó a través de una entrevista semiestructurada. Se utilizó el análisis temático. El proyecto fue aprobado por el Comité de Ética en Investigación del Área de la Salud de la FURG, bajo el parecer 153/2013. **Resultados:** Después de la transcripción y el análisis de las conversaciones surgieron cuatro categorías que se discutieron por separado. **Conclusión:** Se propone que el docente tenga una postura motivadora, movilizadora del conocimiento y centradas en el académico a fin de reflejar en la asistencia del futuro profesional.

**Descriptor:** Ansiedad, estudiantes de enfermería, enseñanza superior.

## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a feeling that affects a great number of undergraduates, since in the course of academic life, they have to deal with stressful situations that generate anxiety, requiring psychological and emotional resources to handle the demands and adversities during their formation. The failure to identify, investigate and treat early signs and symptoms related to anxiety leads to negative results for the academic and may compromise their professional and/or personal development.<sup>1,2</sup>

Such a feeling is regarded as a natural reaction, an instinct for survival, succeeded by an unpleasant sense of apprehension, a response of the organism to something that represents a danger, or is perceived in that way by the individual. The components of anxiety are psychological and somatic being some of their physical manifestations: tachycardia, hyperventilation, palpitation, and tremors; can also become chronic with manifestations such as phobias, conversive disorder, dissociative states, obsessions or compulsions.<sup>3</sup> The manifestations of anxiety are not only the result of conflicts in the unconscious, but are also derived from habits, in other words, from behaviors acquired through of learning, then leading to an inadequate way of coping with everyday problems.<sup>4,5</sup>

These habits or manifestations that trigger anxious reactions are present in our daily lives and are lived differently by people and even differently by the same person. Anxiety, as long as it is not excessive, can be beneficial as it encourages and motivates people to respond appropriately to situations that arise in their lives, including periods of evaluation at university, times of testing, work, in extreme cases of anxiety, lead to the abandonment of the university.<sup>6</sup>

Given the aforementioned, it is necessary to be attentive to psychic suffering, for it is often regarded as something trivial and inherent in the profession and thus neglected. It is evidenced that the attention and follow-up of students' mental health are directly related and influence their quality of life and may negatively interfere in the form of client care.<sup>7-8</sup> Considering the high prevalence of anxiety among nursing students and the lack of studies in the literature,

this study meant to know the signs of anxiety experienced by nursing undergraduates in a University from the South region of Brazil.

This work was justified by the fact that many undergraduate nursing students show signs and symptoms of anxiety. It was decided to carry out a qualitative research in order to deepen knowledge regarding the feelings of the students throughout the academic life about the possible factors triggering the anxiety. The guiding question of this study was as follows: What are the feelings expressed by the students about situations that cause anxiety during the graduation course?

## METHODS

It is a descriptive-exploratory research with a qualitative approach. The study was carried out in the academic area of the *Dr. Miguel Riet Corrêa Jr.* University Hospital at *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande (FURG)*, located in *Rio Grande* city, *Rio Grande do Sul* State. The course currently has 222 enrolled students.

Two nursing undergraduates from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> semester were selected, thus totaling 18 subjects. If there were more than two participants, the choice would be to maintain the neutrality of the researcher, and then a randomized poll was performed with those who showed interest in participating in the study. Only the academic students of the nursing graduation course of the *FURG* were included in the research. Those who did not have an interest in participating in the research were excluded.

Data collection was performed through a semi-structured interview, with 10 open questions related to the anxiety feelings of the students during the graduation time. The interviews took place individually and lasted around 30 minutes each and were recorded by mp4 for later transcription. The collection was carried out over the months from November to December 2013.

The data analysis aims to organize them in a way that allows the provision of answers to the problem proposed for research. In this study the thematic analysis was used, which corresponds to three stages: pre-analysis, material exploration and data handling and interpretation.<sup>9</sup> After analyzing the interviews and organizing the answers obtained with this instrument, a joint was established between the data collected in the research and the theoretical references to satisfy the objective to which the work was planned.

The project was submitted and approved by the Nursing Research Committee from the Nursing School at *FURG*; by the Research Ethics Committee from the Health Area at *FURG*, obtaining approval by the Legal Opinion No. 153/2013. Participants were clarified about the study's objectives and methodology, and were asked to sign it in the Free and Informed Consent Term, thus guaranteeing confidentiality to participants who were identified by the letter "A" and also by the interview number.

## RESULTS

From the reading of the participants' speeches, four categories appeared as results that will be discussed in their own session. The categories were thus divided as follows: feelings of anxiety during the university adaptation period; feelings of the academics with regards to the examinations (tests); feelings of anxiety of the academics when facing the reprobation; and, feelings of anxiety towards the professor/student relationship in the teaching/learning process.

### Feelings of anxiety during the university adaptation period

The academics said that at the beginning of the course, especially in the first three semesters, adaptation is difficult and that feelings of anxiety and fear arise in the face of the unknown and the new phase of transition that they have to face. For many, there is also a very significant factor that includes the distance of theirs and cultural novelty, and there is a need to build coping strategies in the face of the new reality, in other words, having a college degree. Such feelings can be perceived through the following discourses:

We deal with the unknown, a very large volume of information; we see no sense in the things we are learning. It made me very distressed, I often felt out of place, lost. (A03).

The first semester made me very apprehensive, that reality, changing the customs; this made me very nervous, because I did not know what it would be from now on. (A07).

Another relevant aspect that has been highlighted is the difficulty of the students to be inside the university, knowing the various structural paths of the university, in order to know who and where they can seek help when they need it. Regarding the content taught, probably the great change that happens in the teaching/learning process, which requires a greater commitment of the academic in the search for technical-scientific knowledge, usually causes that the anxiety is high as reported in the following statements:

It's a whole new world, a lot of collection, and a lot of new stuff. We go to high school with a study dynamics and then we come here and we do not know how to study. There were times when I despaired, I thought I would not get it; it was very complicated for me. (A05).

During academic life, the adaptation phase is very difficult, everything is different, at first I did not know how to do the work, I was very anxious. (A15).

### Feelings of the academics with regards to the examinations (tests)

The academics reported what they feel in front of a test, be it theoretical and/or practical, throughout the course. In the theoretical evaluations, it was possible to perceive that students from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> semester were very anxious, as shown in the following statements:

I feel anxious in the tests, in the week of tests, I was in examination in two seats in the first semester and this left me very stressed, nervous, I studied 12 hours a day to pass in one and the other I could not because I did not know how to deal with nervousness at the time of the tests. (A03).

I feel tense when there is a marked test and we have to study and you see that there is no time, then you know that you need to study more and time does not leave, you want to sleep, you want to eat, you want to do everything and the time does not leave. (A04).

Some students were more anxious at the time of the practical assessments of the course, especially in the subjects of the third semester:

Over the period of tests you get tense and anxious, I think it is the tensest moment, mainly practical test; your legs shake because as much as you know you are doing the right thing, you do not know if in the professor's viewpoint that's right. (A03).

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester, in the discipline of Semiology II I felt very nervous, I felt very overstretched, I was already waking up anxious, and in the practical test then, I started to cry, I thought I did not know anything. (A12).

### Feelings of anxiety of the academics when facing the reprobation

Scholars expressed their feelings of reprobation. It was possible to perceive that the semesters that had more reprobations were the first, the third and the sixth semesters:

I felt very anxious when I repeated a semester discipline. I already had a very heavy workload, plus the subjects of the first semester. That made me feel incapable because I was here just to study and I could not. (A10).

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester, I repeated a story. It made me anxious and anxious. It was very exhausting for me. (A09).

In the 6<sup>th</sup> semester, I failed in a discipline that I had great difficulty. I felt very anxious and insecure. It was always finished, not wanting to do anything, it was horrible, I wanted the semester to pass soon or else I could not take it. (A14).

## Feelings of anxiety towards the professor/student relationship in the teaching/learning process

Academics reported the aspects related to the professor/student relationship and the negative feelings that this relationship generates in the teaching/learning process mentioned below:

I felt very anxious on the first day of the internship because I did not have a good relationship with the professor, and in my opinion, it is not by putting pressure that you lead a student, or even teach. It was horrible. (A11).

The 6<sup>th</sup> semester for me was frustrating: the professor put me down, even when I received a compliment from the patients themselves. I could not relate to her. I felt very bad, tense and stressed. (A15).

As opposed to the abovementioned, two students reported that they had a good relation with some professors of the disciplines of the fourth semester and that they gave positive feelings to them, as we can verify in the following statements:

The disciplines of Child Health and Women's Health were very nice. The professors helped a lot, but also everything collaborated: the content, the environment, we had more freedom to act, we felt that the professor had confidence. (A10).

There are still good professors who really understand what they are talking about, who give you security and that makes me feel better. (A11).

## DISCUSSION

When expressing the feelings of anxiety in the period of adaptation to university, to reinforce the statements that have already been exposed previously, a study carried out at a University of Canada points out as difficulty experienced by the student and generator of stress the distance of the family and the culture of its place as well as the acquisition of new responsibilities. The difficulty in adapting the academic is a factor that can contribute to the manifestation of psychological problems.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there is a need to build strategies to adapt to the new scenario and face difficulties that may arise from this personal, social and environmental.

Still in order to corroborate with the reports about the distance of their and cultural novelty found in the new context, an author reports that upon entering university, students are submitted to an excessive demand for stress, mainly due to personal collections, coexistence with colleagues from different locations, for long hours of study, often triggering feelings of helplessness and failure in these young people. Such everyday academic and life situations generate feelings of anxiety such as fear and excessive worry,

as there are numerous changes that occur in this period and, generally, the academic is not prepared to face them.<sup>10</sup>

Another important aspect addressed in this category was the difficulty of the students to be located within the university, either in relation to the structure of the university or to the contents and help needed for this new adaptation. Corroborating with the aforementioned lines referring to this context, an author brings in a study that the entrance in the superior education associates to a process of transition that needs to be well-founded. This stage is replete with sources of stress (evaluations, clinical teaching, competitiveness...), which require the students of nursing, constant adaptations to overcome the difficulties, since the transitions involved in this level of education end up implying a higher level of anxiety, from motivation to completion of the course, separation of family and friends, autonomy in learning and a greater need for time and resource management, new relationships, as well as professional and career prospects.<sup>11</sup>

In the second category that brings the feelings of the students towards the examinations (tests), there is a strong feeling of anxiety present among the students when expressing themselves on the theoretical tests. The anxiety state is like a physiological reaction of the organism, often functioning as an "instinct," since it can make predictable situations of danger or threat approaching, thus preparing the body to take the necessary measures, in order to prevent the realization of these possible damages, or at least to diminish their consequences.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, studies confirm that anxiety, depending on the circumstance may be positive, as it mobilizes and motivates individuals in search of knowledge in order to achieve good performance, which will reflect, later in the professional quality.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, anxiety becomes pathological when it paralyzes the individual, preventing him from carrying out daily activities, which was evident when the study participant indicated that he had not obtained the necessary note for approval. One study shows that even if the student has prepared for a particular test, he may not succeed because he cannot handle anxiety that is often excessive.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, anxiety may be related to various psychological disorders and may be considered a mental disorder depending on the level of anxiety and associated factors.<sup>14</sup> This may trigger social anxiety which is one of the most frequent problems of mental health today.<sup>15</sup>

A study carried out at a University from the South region of *Santa Catarina* State found that the evaluations, according to the students, generate a lot of anxiety. They were concerned with the semesters, what would actually be charged with the contents, in the theoretical examinations, because they did not know exactly what objectives were to be achieved, what they prioritized in the studies, and if it met the professor's objectives.<sup>16</sup> Thus, anxiety ends up interfering with the student's cognitive aspects of his selective attention, often blocking comprehension and reasoning, thus diminishing the acquisition of intellectual abilities and their performance in general.<sup>17</sup>

Still in terms of academic performance, the literature reveals that high levels of anxiety decrease operational memory and reasoning, causing distraction in students, which means that students with higher levels of anxiety tend to score lower on assessments, and may even trigger depression.<sup>18-9</sup>

The success of college students depends on their ability to use time properly and more efficiently. The students' time management skills decrease as the level of anxiety increases. So this is an extremely important skill that nursing students must acquire during their academic life so that they can increase their competence and quality of service. Managing time efficiently means that the individual can control his or her life.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, some students were more eager to take the practical tests. Confirming the findings regarding the feelings experienced during the practical evaluations, a study<sup>21</sup> brings reports of academics where they point out the emergence of anxiety and discomfort to perform the procedures in the presence of the observer during the evaluations. Still, in terms of performance, the students stated that it looked like they were not doing anything, or it looked like they did not know what they were doing. These issues refer to the critical components that influence student learning and the behavior of the professors involved in the practical assessments.

According to a study carried out with nursing undergraduates at a State University from the *Mato Grosso do Sul* State, where the sample studied allowed us to detect that the third semester is the one in which the student shows greater weaknesses, when he needs more support from the professors, and in this period, students are in the initial phase of insertion into hospital clinical fields, witnessing death and morbidities in a stressful environment causing anxiety.<sup>17</sup>

The third category portrays the students' feelings of anxiety about reproach where early-grade students are more anxious because core disciplines are often not in their interest or primary domain. According to research with university students,<sup>2,22</sup> and on the relationship between anxiety and academic performance, it was observed that a great part of these students presented high levels of anxiety, which reflected in the low academic performance. Many of them failed at least one course during the course.

Besides the fear of not being approved in the evaluations and having to repeat some discipline for failure, a study<sup>22</sup> shows through reports made by nursing students that after the development of the simulation activity, allowed reflection on the results of the actions themselves and also the recognition of the level of anxiety, nervousness or attitudes that compromise performance during the simulation.

This is an important issue that needs to be considered by professors, since frequent negative feelings and repeated failures usually lead to low self-esteem and inferiority, and can trigger several mental disorders, among them, the depressive disorder, the most drastic and serious consequence is suicide.<sup>23-4</sup> However, in these cases there is a need to be alert to possible changes in the individual's

behavior and, if this occurs, to try to know their previous history in order to avoid such a situation.<sup>25</sup>

It is understood that to present greater difficulty in some disciplines is normal, since this depends on numerous factors, among them: to have or not affinity; how important you consider it; greater or lesser ease to learn, among others. Nonetheless, the evaluation is a controversial issue that has been discussed for a long time in the area of education and still constitutes an obstacle in terms of how it should be carried out more fairly.<sup>26</sup>

In the latter category, we can observe the two faces about the feelings of anxiety about the professor/student relationship in the teaching/learning process. Research carried out in the form of an integrative review about stressful relationships and anxiety triggers in nursing undergraduates<sup>27</sup> considered crucial in the academic trajectory, behaviors, and attitudes detrimental in the professor/student relationship, among them authoritarianism and the intimidating role of the professor. They also mentioned the lack of respect and lack of ethics on the part of the professors as elements that can cause the student to feel neglected which hinders the interaction between professor/student, triggering negative factors in the teaching/learning process.

Bearing in mind the professor/student relationship, the disappointment with the type of bond established with professors can occur mainly due to distance, formality, the few possibilities of social interaction and the perception of less interest in individual student issues.<sup>28</sup> The reality of Higher Education may not correspond to the students' expectation of maintaining the proximity and protection ties experienced in the school.<sup>25</sup>

A study<sup>28</sup> corroborates with the reports found in this category, where it was possible to perceive how receptivity and encouragement of professors are important for students' academic adaptation. The university students also explained that many professors act in an authoritarian and rigid way, frightening them. Because of this distance, many young people do not feel comfortable approaching and doubting their professors.

Conversely, in order to base the positive reports about the feelings of anxiety about the professor/student relationship in the teaching/learning process, in a University from the central region of *Rio Grande do Sul* State, undergraduates report about the good relation between professor/student where Participants listed a number of factors that contribute to better learning: the professor should not only transmit knowledge, transmit security, but also be understandable, communicate in a more empathetic way, and the way of establishing relationships also seems to facilitate the learning process. It also stimulates internal motivation and, consequently, the interest by the content taught.<sup>28-9</sup>

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the studies on anxiety signs in university students are still scarce, this feeling is more and more present among students and the demands that are made

during the graduation allow for the manifestation of such evidence. Herein, it was observed that nursing students present anxiety manifestations throughout the undergraduate course, which may disrupt their academic training, and may influence how they act professionally, as well as how they handle their own health, and in the case of nursing students, it might influence the relationship with their future patients.

It is thought that these signs affect most of the students due to the complexity of the course and thus, it is suggested as one of the strategies to minimize this discomfort/disorder, the approximation of the professor/student relationship, since some academics cannot externalize their feelings and this makes them “unnoticed” and/or “disqualified” by professors. Thus, their potential is disregarded and only their fragility assessed, which in turn further increases their low self-esteem and their feelings of incapacity and inferiority.

Given the discussed data, this study points to the need for changes in the professor/student relationship, through the qualification of the faculty with health education focused on didactics, so that the interaction encourages and encourages students to get involved more and more with the activities proposed by the course and acquire an empathic look towards the academic. It is proposed that the professor should have a motivating, knowledge-mobilizing and academic-centered position. Hence, the nurses will be well trained, self-confident, capable of handling and facing their fragilities, aiming to do their profession with greater success.

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