

Mental health in postgraduate programs: thoughts and perspectives on mental illness among the students

Saúde mental na pós-graduação: reflexões e perspectivas sobre o adoecimento entre estudantes
Salud mental en la posgrado: reflexiones y perspectivas sobre el deterioro entre estudiantes

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EDITORIAL

Postgraduate education represents a path of important value in professional training and in the development of remarkable research and studies for the scientific community. For this purpose, postgraduate programs are permanently aiming to provide proper teaching qualification achieved through a joint collective effort made by coordinators, teachers and students, as well as partnerships with other national and international higher education institutions.

However, although the paths are generally prosperous, postgraduate programs also bring challenges and difficulties that may turn into obstacles in this experience. Recent research on mental health has highlighted the presence of symptoms related to depression, anxiety, or stress among postgraduate students. Although mental illness among master's and doctoral students is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, some guiding questions can be highlighted to understand this scenario.

The numerous requirements demanded by the course and the intense dedication necessary to construct a research project combined with a multidimensional set of social, individual, economic and/or interpersonal factors have the potential to significantly impact the psycho-emotional balance of postgraduate students and can also be predictive factors for mental distress.

Furthermore, the continuous pressure to maintain a significant production of high-quality original research papers in journals of great scientific impact – often under strict deadlines – may lead to an increase in symptoms of acute stress and a decline in positive productivity as these students constantly feel that their outcome is way below the expectations.

The relationship with advisors is also one of the basic factors that contributes to a satisfactory experience (or not) for students in postgraduate courses. Conflicts, lack of support or poor communication in this relationship can turn into a major cause for increased emotional stress. Intensified by academic pressure, the dynamics of these relationships may deeply affect the psychological well-being of the students and even lead to a potential dropout.

Within these contexts, academic culture usually links the resistance to high levels of demand and pressure to behaviors that are intrinsic to postgraduate students. However, counterproductively, this line of thought causes discussions about mental health to be neglected or placed in the background; when these issues are masked, students

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feel discouraged from seeking help or openly sharing their difficulties and experiences.

Potential resolute guidance that can meet this complexity of contexts may be analyzed when considering an expanded and interconnected extension of the key points of the problem. The integration between health and educational policies has been one of the fundamental premises established based on the global strategies of world organizations. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a United Nations (UN) initiative(1) aimed at promoting sustainable development in different areas, proposes 17 goals related to political, economic and environmental issues, as well as to the social and mental well-being of the people.

SDG 3 and SDG 4, in particular, are goals focused on “Health and well-being” and “Quality Education”, respectively, and refer to the implementation of regulations and activities that prioritize health and educational demands. The interconnection of these goals recognizes the uniqueness of each of these domains but also highlights the significant interdependence between them.

Considering this aspect, it is imperative that postgraduate programs seek alignment with the SDGs through solid cohesion between quality education and health promotion. The maintenance of the quality of the programs can be influenced by several factorial roots and, certainly, student commitment is also one of the core elements that contributes to the level of qualification of this teaching. However, the interaction between program and student must work reciprocally. Reflecting on such issues within the academic walls is an initial step towards implementing significant changes, transforming global goals into potentially tangible actions.

The organization of events and lectures aimed at discussing the importance of mental health and psycho-emotional well-being during postgraduate studies, as well as the psychological support for students during this period, are feasible actions that can promote a more sustainable academic environment. It is also important to highlight that the significance of these series of conversations, debates and lectures is permanent and must be maintained throughout the whole calendar, not being restricted to symbolic months such as the “White January”, a campaign that draws awareness to the importance, prevention, and promotion of mental health.

Thus, it is concluded that the teaching qualification must break the barriers that consider the curricular criteria as the single ground for academic excellence. Promoting the integration of organizational strategies in the institutions that can jointly prioritize the academic involvement and focus on to the well-being and mental health of postgraduate students is essential to develop academic environments that can build and maintain the success of master's and doctoral programs.



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