


Impacts of COVID-19 on mental health in Paraguayan university students

Impactos del COVID-19 en la salud mental en universitarios de Paraguay

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Background

In 2020, the Coronavirus disease pandemic drastically impacted society and became a major global health problem. In addition, it triggered an increase in mental health disorders (depression, anxiety, and stress). These problems affected many of the world's population, including university students migrating rapidly to online classes. These were received by students isolated in their homes. In the case of Paraguay, classes were offered in this modality for almost two years. This meant there was tremendous pressure to assimilate teaching content quickly and keep up with academic activities due to the restrictions of confinement and the lack of social life. In addition, students suffered a disruption of their routines, as they had to add family, work, and social activities online.

Aims

This study aimed to analyse the major risk factors associated with the symptomatology of mental health disorders in students at public and private universities caused by the impact of COVID-19.

Method & procedures

We applied a non-experimental, cross-sectional design using an online questionnaire administered during health restrictions between 12 October 2021 and 22 January 2022. The DASS-21 was administered to a sample of 833 students from eight universities in Paraguay. Participants were studying medicine, psychology, nursing, kinesiology, and dentistry, with a mean age of 22.7 years. Ordinal logistic regression was used for data analysis.

Results & discussion

Our findings revealed that female gender and family history are associated risk factors for developing depressive and anxious symptoms and stress. These results are consistent with previous studies in the UK and China, where we found that women have higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depression and that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the likelihood of having any of these symptoms. Specifically, they score higher on the dependent variable of anxiety and stress. These results align with the previous study on an increased likelihood of mental health symptomatology and COVID-19. On the other hand, age is a protective factor concerning mental health symptomatology, as younger people have higher levels of depression, anxiety, or stress. These results are consistent with a previous study conducted in 2022. Similarly, our results show that medical students are more frequently associated with stress symptomatology than students in other careers. Therefore, the impact of COVID-19 on the well-being of medical

students is greater in comparison to other groups since these people have had a greater involvement as health workers.

Conclusion

This research represents one of the few attempts to examine the significant risk factors associated with the symptomatology of mental health disorders in students obtained from the DASS-21 scale. Among the factors examined were age, gender, degree courses studied, along with possible family history and loss of work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These results could help identify students more likely to suffer from depressive and/or anxious symptomatology. This may help university centres to develop specialized mental health protocols for all those university students who require psychosocial support and psychological and/or psychiatric care on time, with constant follow-up. We recognise that one of the study's main limitations is that it is a cross-sectional study, in which it is impossible to identify temporal or causal relationships between the associated factors. In addition, there could be a bias concerning the answers obtained to the tests, considering the time of application of the instruments, which corresponds to the time of the final evaluations of the academic year. Finally, the equivalent number of participants of each university grade and gender was not homogeneous. Nevertheless, our exploratory study presents exciting results that could be confirmed with more extensive studies to confirm our findings.

Keywords: anxiety, COVID-19, depression, mental health, university students

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Conflict of interests: The authors declare to have no conflict of interests.



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