

ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUALITY AMONG STUDENTS IN THE 1ST TO 4TH SEMESTERS OF MEDICINE AT UNIEVANGÉLICA AS A MECHANISM FOR MAINTAINING MENTAL HEALTH DURING MEDICAL SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization (WHO) considers spirituality not only a religious practice, but also a factor that directly affects quality of life. Among medical students, especially during their internship, spirituality plays a fundamental role in emotional balance and psychological well-being. This study aimed to explore the academic context of medical students, assessing their emotional state and the impact of spirituality in this setting. The results pointed to a predominance of anxiety symptoms, with a lower incidence of depression, and indicated that many students find spirituality an important support in facing daily challenges. The act of caring for others also strengthens their sense of purpose, reinforcing their feeling of personal fulfillment. In summary, spirituality proves to be an essential tool for these students, offering them support in stress management and promoting resilience, comfort, and meaning throughout their academic journey.

Keywords: Medical students; Mental health; Spirituality; Socioeconomic profile.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health has gained increasing attention in social and academic debates, especially after the impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is not merely the absence of disease, but a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being (COSTA *et al.*, 2022). This expanded concept places mental health as one of the fundamental pillars for quality of life and overall balance in human beings. In the academic context, especially in demanding undergraduate programs such as medicine, students' mental well-being is often neglected, resulting in a high incidence of emotional and psychological disorders.

From the beginning of their undergraduate studies, medical students face major challenges, such as pressure to perform, fierce competition, and an immense study load. Researches indicate that this intense routine leads to a significant increase in cases of anxiety and depression among students, who experience severe symptoms of emotional exhaustion (ARAGÃO *et al.*, 2017). As they advance to their internship, where professional demands become more intense, many students find themselves in

highly stressful situations, which aggravate their mental and emotional state. Given this, it is essential to analyze how they deal with these pressures and what resources can help them overcome these challenges.

Spirituality, often confused with religiosity, refers to a personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be linked to religious practices. According to Oliveira and Junges (2012), spirituality helps people to better cope with stressful situations, suffering, and life challenges, generating feelings of acceptance, resilience, and peace. Amid the emotional chaos that many medical students face, spirituality can be an important source of strength and emotional support. Students who have spiritual or religious practice often report greater coping skills in the face of difficulties and a deeper sense of purpose in their academic training.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the emotional fragility of many students, and the demand for therapeutic support has grown exponentially after long periods of isolation and traumatic losses. Amid this crisis, spirituality has emerged as a tool for resilience, helping many find comfort and balance in times of uncertainty (COSTA *et al.*, 2022). The connection between spirituality and mental health has been explored in recent studies, which point to a positive impact of spiritual practices on emotional well-being, regardless of religious tradition (MONTEIRO *et al.*, 2019).

Given this context, we aim to analyze how spiritual beliefs and religious practice can act as factors of resilience, helping students cope with stress and academic pressures, thus contributing to a more balanced and healthy education. In addition, this study aims to understand the correlation between spirituality and mental health among medical students in their first to fourth semesters at the UniEVANGÉLICA medical program.

METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive in nature, with a cross-sectional design and a qualitative approach. It was conducted using questionnaires that assess the spirituality, religiosity, and mental health of medical students at UniEVANGÉLICA. After approval by the Ethics Committee, 300 students from the 1st to the 12th semesters of the course

were invited to participate in the research, upon signing a Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) – population found by sample calculation. Thus, the population of this study consisted of only 100 students from the 1st to the 4th year of the medical program – basic cycle.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be over 18 years of age and duly enrolled in the medical program. Students who did not correctly complete the questionnaire or the FICF were excluded from the study. Data collection was divided into two stages: initially, students were informed about the research and invited to participate; in the second stage, data were collected through an electronic questionnaire, available at the following address: <https://forms.gle/n86RAe3FmQzpkfy7>, consisting of 35 questions based on the following spirituality scales: SSRS (*Spirituality Self Rating Scale*), DASS-21, WHO-SRPB, and FACIT-sp, in addition to a socioeconomic questionnaire adapted from ENADE.

Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviation, and frequencies. For comparison between groups and to verify the normality of the data, tests such as *Student's t-test*, *Mann-Whitney*, and *Pearson* or *Spearman* correlation were applied, depending on the symmetry of the distribution. All data collected were treated confidentially, in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council, and have been approved by the CEP through opinion 6.822.628. The results will be analyzed using SPSS software, with a significant level of $P < 0.05$.

PARTIAL RESULTS

The study included a total of 51 students. Regarding religion, 52.94% of students (27 students) identified themselves as Catholic, while a smaller portion, 9.80% (5 students), declared themselves agnostic. These data indicate a predominance of students with Christian religious affiliation, which may influence their ways of dealing with stress during their academic life.

In terms of parental education, it was observed that a significant portion of students come from families with a high level of education. Regarding parental education, most students indicated that their parents have a college degree or

postgraduate degree. This data suggests that many of these students can count on solid academic and financial support at home, which may mitigate some of the emotional challenges faced in the course.

Regarding emotional conditions, 49.02% (25 students) reported difficulty relaxing or calming down during the course, while 35.29% (18 students) indicated that they totally agreed with this statement. These figures highlight a high level of emotional tension among students, reflecting the challenging nature of the academic environment in the health field.

Regarding exaggerated emotional reactions, 45.10% (23 students) stated that they tend to react excessively in certain situations, and 15.69% (8 students) agreed completely with this tendency. These data indicate that a considerable portion of students face difficulties in managing their emotions, which may be associated with academic stress.

Finally, regarding nervousness, 39.22% (20 students) indicated that they feel constantly nervous, with another 17.65% (9 students) agreeing completely with this feeling. These data suggest that almost half of the students deal with high levels of anxiety, which may affect their academic performance and overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the data obtained reveal a vulnerable emotional profile among the students participating in the study, with many reporting difficulties in relaxing, constant nervousness, and a tendency toward exaggerated emotional reactions. The high level of education of their parents suggests that these students can count on academic and financial support, although this does not seem to be sufficient to completely mitigate the emotional impact of the academic environment. Differences in religious identities may also influence the coping strategies adopted by students, reflecting a plurality of approaches to stress management. The research highlights the importance of institutional emotional support policies to ensure the well-being of students during their academic training.

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