

# EVALUATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUALITY AMONG MEDICAL STUDENTS FROM THE 5TH TO 8TH SEMESTER AT UNIEVANGÉLICA AS A MECHANISM FOR MAINTAINING MENTAL HEALTH DURING MEDICAL SCHOOL

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## ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes spirituality not merely as a religious practice, but also as a factor that influences quality of life. For medical students, especially during their internship, spirituality proves to be an important resource for psychological balance and mental well-being. This study sought to understand the academic reality of medical students in relation to their emotional state and how spirituality acts in this context. The results indicate that most students show symptoms of anxiety, with less incidence of depression, and that many find spirituality a source of strength to deal with daily difficulties. In addition, caring for others brings greater purpose to their lives, reinforcing their sense of belonging. In summary, spirituality emerges as a valuable tool for these students, helping them cope with stress and providing meaning, comfort, and resilience throughout their academic training.

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

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), encompasses complete physical, mental, and social well-being, going beyond the mere absence of disease. With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the search for therapeutic help, especially among those who have faced traumatic processes, such as loss, depression, and anxiety. Within this context, spirituality has emerged as an important source of support, helping many people find comfort in both religious and metaphysical environments (COSTA *et al.*, 2022).

Spirituality, although often related to religion, has an important distinction: while religion is an organized system of beliefs and rituals, spirituality refers to a personal search for fundamental meanings and purposes in life, which may or may not involve formal religious practice. Religious beliefs, in turn, significantly influence the way people deal with stress and suffering, providing acceptance, resilience, and adaptation to difficult situations. Religiosity, in addition, can generate feelings of

peace, self-confidence, and forgiveness, and promote a positive self-image (OLIVEIRA; JUNGES, 2012).

Medical students, in particular, represent a group highly susceptible to mental disorders, from the pre-university entrance exam period to the university environment. According to Aragão *et al.* (2017), these young people face intense pressure and competitiveness from high school onwards, which leads to mental and physical exhaustion. Even after entering college, the scenario does not improve: the demand for high performance and emotional overload continue to be major factors in the development of serious disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

Despite this challenging scenario, spirituality has been identified as a factor that provides emotional protection for medical students. Studies such as those by Aragão *et al.* (2017) and Bonfim *et al.* (2021) show that many students find solace in devotional practices, prayer, and religious support groups, in addition to developing a greater connection with the metaphysical. Bonfim *et al.* (2021), for example, reveal that, throughout the course, many students begin to perceive the limitations of rational explanations in Western medicine, which strengthens their spiritual convictions.

Given this, the objective of this study is to identify the academic reality of medical students between the fifth and eighth semesters of their undergraduate studies in terms of their mental health and how spirituality influences these disorders.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research is descriptive, with a cross-sectional design and a qualitative approach, focused on assessing the spirituality, religiosity, and mental health of medical students at UniEVANGÉLICA, located in Anápolis (GO), using questionnaires based on similar studies. 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 5th to 8th semesters of the medical course – clinical cycle.

The inclusion criteria were students over 18 years of age, enrolled in the medical course. Those who do not correctly complete the questionnaire or the TCLE will be excluded. Data collection will occur through the application of adapted spirituality and mental health scales. The scales used include the SSRS (*Spirituality Self Rating Scale*), DASS-21 (which assesses depression, anxiety, and stress), WHO-SRPB (Quality of Life associated with Spirituality), FACIT-sp (Spiritual Well-Being), and the ENADE Student 2019 Socioeconomic Questionnaire. The questionnaire based on these scales was presented by Google Forms, containing 35 questions, available at: <https://forms.gle/n86RAe3FfmQzpkfy7>.

Data analysis was performed using means, frequencies, and statistical tests such as *Student's t-test* or *Mann-Whitney test*, with a significance level set at  $P < 0,05$ , and *SPSS software* was used for processing. The study was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee (CEP/UniEVANGÉLICA) in accordance with Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council (CNS) and was approved by the CEP through opinion 6.822.628.

## **PARTIAL RESULTS**

The survey conducted with 72 medical students at UniEvangélica provided relevant insights into the sociodemographic profile of the participants and the emotional conditions they faced during the course. In terms of religion, most students identify as Christian: 40% (28 students) declared themselves Catholic and 40% (28 students) Evangelical/Protestant. Other beliefs include Spiritism, with 5.71% (4 students), Atheism, with 4.29% (3 students), and Agnosticism, with 4.29% (3 students). This religious diversity reflects different approaches to spirituality, which may impact on how students deal with stress and emotional difficulties throughout the course.

Regarding parental education, 31.43% (22 students) reported that their parents have completed high school, 30% (21 students) have a college degree, 22.86% (16 students) have a postgraduate degree, and 15.71% (11 students) have only completed elementary school. The level of education of mothers is slightly higher, with 42.86% (30 students) having completed higher education, 34.29% (24 students) having completed postgraduate studies, 20% (14 students) having

completed secondary education, and 2.86% (2 students) having completed primary education. These data suggest that many students come from families with relatively high levels of education, which may provide more robust emotional and financial support during their undergraduate studies.

Regarding the emotional state of students, 40% (28 students) reported difficulty relaxing or calming down, and another 22.86% (16 students) strongly agreed with this difficulty. However, 30% (21 students) disagreed, showing that although many face difficulties in relaxing, a significant portion do not have this problem. This contrast may reflect different stress management strategies among students, possibly influenced by spirituality.

Regarding exaggerated reactions, 47.14% (33 students) disagreed that they tend to overreact, suggesting that a good portion of students consider themselves emotionally stable. On the other hand, 21.43% (15 students) agreed that they react exaggeratedly, and 18.57% (13 students) totally agreed with this tendency, while 12.86% (9 students) totally disagreed. These data indicate that, although almost half of the students consider themselves emotionally stable, a significant portion perceive that their reactions are more intense, which may reflect high levels of stress.

The survey also investigated students' state of nervousness. While 40% (28 students) disagreed that they feel constantly nervous, 25.71% (18 students) agreed that they are always nervous, and 14.29% (10 students) strongly agreed with this statement, suggesting that a quarter of students deal with constant anxiety. Another 20% (14 students) strongly disagreed, showing that a portion of students feel more comfortable and calmer in their academic environment.

When asked about feelings of depression or lack of motivation, 35.71% (25 students) disagreed that they had experienced these symptoms, while 32.86% (23 students) stated the opposite. Among those who disagreed, 25.71% (18 students) disagreed completely, indicating that they do not feel emotionally down, but 5.71% (4 students) agreed completely that they felt depressed and discouraged, pointing to a deeper emotional problem in some students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research highlights the diversity of emotional experiences among medical students at UniEvangélica, emphasizing the relevance of spirituality as a coping mechanism in the face of academic demands and emotional challenges. Although many students demonstrate resilience, a significant portion face difficulties such as stress, anxiety, and depressive feelings. The predominance of Christian religious beliefs, combined with the favorable socioeconomic background of some students, seems to contribute to emotional support and the ability to cope with the pressure of the course. However, the need for ongoing psychological support is evident, especially for those who report higher levels of stress and nervousness, which highlights the importance of intervention strategies that include emotional and spiritual aspects in the academic environment.

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