

# SOURCES OF STRESS IN PHYSIOTHERAPY STUDENTS AT PHYSIOTHERAPY COURSE

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Stress is defined as the body's non-specific response to demands made to it or to disturbing events in the environment, and high levels of stress experienced over prolonged periods of time can cause significant physical and mental problems (Alsulami et al., 2018). Chronic stress action acts as an inhibitor of learning and cognitive abilities (De Kloet, Oitzl, & Joëls, 1999).

Stress is defined as a major problem in higher education students while dealing with academic, social, and personal challenges. There is a wide spectrum of stress-related factors in this group of individuals, with an increase in their incidence reported in the last decade (Janse Van Vuuren, Bodenstein, & Nel, 2018). Generally, academic stress develops through competition and motivation among students, being beneficial in the learning process (Syed, Ali, & Khan, 2018), and is a factor related to the student's attention mechanisms, promoting memory capacity (Joëls, Pu, Wiegert, Oitzl, & Krugers, 2006). However, stress at exacerbated levels includes a real or perceptible threat to a particular individual, either physical or psychogenic (Conrad, Ortiz, & Judd, 2017), affecting the mental health of students. The mental health of university students represents a relevant public health problem of increasing importance (World Federation for Mental Health, 2012).

This study aimed to explore the sources of stress, assessed by the questionnaire "Undergraduate Sources of Stress - Portuguese version", by academic year of the degree in physiotherapy at Alcoitão School of Health Sciences.

The questionnaires were distributed to students via institutional e-mail using Google forms and we obtained 141 answers from a universe of 227 students in the Physiotherapy course in the academic year of 2019-2020.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) between groups was performed. The students were divided into groups according to the academic year they attend and there was a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the results of the total score of USOS for the four groups of students:  $F(3, 137) = 7.6$   $p = 0.000$ . The size of the effect was calculated using the eta-square which was 0.14 which in Cohen's (1988, pp. 284–7) terms would be considered a large effect size.

The Post-hoc comparisons, using the Tukey test indicating that the average value of the group of 4th graders ( $M = 20.89$ ,  $SD = 8.98$ ) is significantly different from the groups of 1st year students ( $M = 32.64$ ,  $SD = 12.38$ ) and 2nd year ( $M = 32.26$ ,  $SD = 12.02$ ). The group of 3rd-year students ( $M = 27.32$ ,  $SD = 14.13$ ) did not differ significantly from each group of 1st, 2nd and 4th-year students in terms of USOS total score. When analyzing the subscales in the USOS questionnaire the group of 4th graders is significantly different from the group of 2nd year ( $MD = 2.57$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ) students in the financial subscale; significantly different from the 1st year ( $MD = 5.15$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) group of students in the personal subscale, and significantly different from the 1st ( $MD = 5.30$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and 2nd ( $MD = 6.15$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) year's group of students in the academic subscale.

In the present sample, the highest sources of stress were: stressful situations, intellectual requirements of the course, and the general level of stress. Given that the academic dimension is the most stress-inducing dimension in students, educational institutions should analyze this aspect in order to reduce the sources of stress in higher education students.

**keywords:** physiotherapy, sources of stress, students.

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