

# Anxious Symptoms in Post-COVID University Students: An Integrative Literature Review

Sintomas Ansiosos em Estudantes Universitários Pós COVID: Uma Revisão Integrativa de Literatura  
Síntomas de Ansiedad en Estudiantes Universitarios Post-COVID: Una Revisión Integradora de la Literatura

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Compreender como os sintomas ansiosos se comportam após o período crítico do COVID-19 entre os estudantes universitários conforme dados da literatura. **Métodos:** Trata-se de uma revisão integrativa de literatura, realizada em cinco etapas, que incluiu artigos publicados em periódicos a partir do ano de 2021. **Resultados:** A amostra foi separada em título/ano, objetivo do estudo e principais achados, onde os resultados evidenciaram o adoecimento mental da população universitária no período pós-pandêmico. As modificações geradas pela pandemia favoreceram o surgimento dos sintomas ansiosos em acadêmicos, como o distanciamento social, aumento do consumo de substâncias psicoativas, alteração na metodologia de ensino, sedentarismo, diminuição do rendimento acadêmico e alteração do sono. **Conclusão:** Evidencia-se que compreensão dos sinais e sintomas ansiosos manifestos pelos universitários no período pós-pandemia possibilita uma visão voltada a saúde mental destes universitários, tendo em vista que a universidade pode ser um gatilho para outros transtornos psiquiátricos. **DESCRIPTORIOS:** Assistência à Saúde Mental. Ansiedade. Enfermagem. Saúde do Estudante. COVID-19.

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To understand how anxiety symptoms behave after the critical period of COVID-19 among university students, based on data from the literature. **Methods:** This is an integrative literature review, conducted in five stages, which included articles published in journals since 2021. **Results:** The sample was separated by title/year, study objective, and main findings. The results highlighted the mental illness of the university population in the post-pandemic period. Changes generated by the pandemic favored the emergence of anxiety symptoms among students, such as social distancing, increased consumption of psychoactive substances, changes in teaching methodology, sedentary lifestyle, decreased academic performance, and sleep disturbances. **Conclusion:** It is evident that understanding the signs and symptoms of anxiety manifested by university students in the post-pandemic period enables a perspective focused on their mental health, considering that university can be a trigger for other psychiatric disorders.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Mental Health Assistance. Anxiety. Nursing. Student Health. COVID-19.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Comprender cómo se comportan los síntomas de ansiedad después del período crítico de COVID-19 entre estudiantes universitarios, con base en datos de la literatura. **Métodos:** Se trata de una revisión integradora de la literatura, realizada en cinco etapas, que incluyó artículos publicados en revistas desde 2021. **Resultados:** La muestra se separó por título/año, objetivo del estudio y hallazgos principales. Los resultados destacaron la enfermedad mental de la población universitaria en el período pospandemia. Los cambios generados por la pandemia favorecieron la aparición de síntomas de ansiedad entre los estudiantes, como el distanciamiento social, el aumento del consumo de sustancias psicoactivas, los cambios en la metodología de enseñanza, el sedentarismo, la disminución del rendimiento académico y las alteraciones del sueño. **Conclusión:** Es evidente que comprender los signos y síntomas de ansiedad manifestados por los estudiantes universitarios en el período pospandemia permite una perspectiva centrada en su salud mental, considerando que la universidad puede ser un desencadenante de otros trastornos psiquiátricos.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Atención de salud mental. Ansiedad. Enfermería. Salud estudiantil. COVID-19.

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## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety syndromes are defined as a feeling that causes discomfort and confusion of feelings, such as apprehension, stress, fear, and are usually accompanied by symptoms such as chest tightness, restlessness, headache, sweating, stomach discomfort, among other symptoms<sup>(1)</sup>.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), anxiety disorders have characteristics similar to fear, where anxiety and fear will differ depending on the context in which the symptoms arise. Thus, fear is something that is triggered by a concrete and imminent situation of danger, while anxiety can arise without any clear situation of danger.

With regard to epidemiological data on social anxiety disorder, worldwide, the prevalence is 9% in children and 15% in adults. Rates of social anxiety are higher in women than in men in the general population.

In Brazil, studies show that the mental health of the population is increasingly compromised, given that the country ranks fourth in the world in terms of the prevalence of anxiety, which is often accompanied by depressive disorders<sup>(3)</sup>.

The university environment is undoubtedly a place where young people and adults enter with many dreams and expectations, but it is also a place that will require, throughout their education, sacrifices, responsibilities, and routines that will generate stress and, consequently, the development

of anxiety and depressive disorders.

In a study conducted with health students, anxiety levels were observed in the entire research population, with rates ranging from physiological anxiety to mild anxiety. They also raised the following as possible causes of these disorders: change of residence, heavy routines, and difficulty in establishing new social bonds<sup>(5)</sup>.

Considering these data, this study aims to understand how anxiety symptoms behave after the critical period of COVID-19 among university students according to data from the national literature.

## METHOD

This is an integrative literature review designed to understand how

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anxiety symptoms behave after the critical period of COVID-19 among university students.

The integrative review consists of a methodological analysis of several sources with the same theme, whose objective is to synthesize the results obtained in a systematic and organized manner, divided into seven stages: (1) identification of the problem and construction of the guiding question; (2) designation of search descriptors, as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria; (3) sampling from the search and, consequently, articles selected based on the established criteria; (4) reading and classification of the articles selected for review; (5) analysis of the selected references and selection of information for the guiding bases; (6) evaluation and discussion of the findings; and (7) summary of the data obtained <sup>(6)</sup>.

The first stage of the review was guided by the question “what are the findings in the literature on anxiety symptoms in the university population in Brazil after COVID-19?”. Defined using the PICO strategy (P: population/patients; I: intervention; C: comparison/control; O: outcome). The use of this strategy permeates the construction of a more informed question <sup>(7)</sup>.

The second stage began with the definition of the Health Sciences Descriptors (DECS) researched: anxiety, student health, and COVID-19. The following search strategies were used: (1) “ANXIETY (AND) STUDENT HEALTH (AND) COVID-19.” A survey of publications was conducted by consulting articles in the following databases: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SCIELO), Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), ARCA FioCruz. The search for articles in the selected databases was carried out during March and April 2023.

The inclusion criteria used were: scientific articles, available in full in

Portuguese, published from 2021 onwards. Review articles in English, theoretical and reflective studies, studies that did not address the topic, studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria, and articles that, despite addressing the topic, did not reflect the post-pandemic scenario\* were excluded.

The third stage consisted of data collection and selection of materials eligible for this study. The articles were analyzed by reading the title, abstract, full text, and inclusion according to the objective of this review, selected themes, and research question outlined.

In the fourth stage, a critical analysis of the studies included in this review was performed using the Bardin technique. This type of analysis involves three stages: pre-analysis, which consists of a thorough reading

of the material and systematization of the content; in the second stage, the material was explored, with a detailed reading of the selected materials, highlighting the main findings to be used in the next phase, called data processing, where the data is categorized and, finally, interpreted<sup>(8)</sup>.

In the fifth stage, the results were arranged in a schematic table and the discussion was presented together with the description of the results.

From the combination of descriptors, 121 articles were identified, of which 13 were selected for synthesis of the study, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

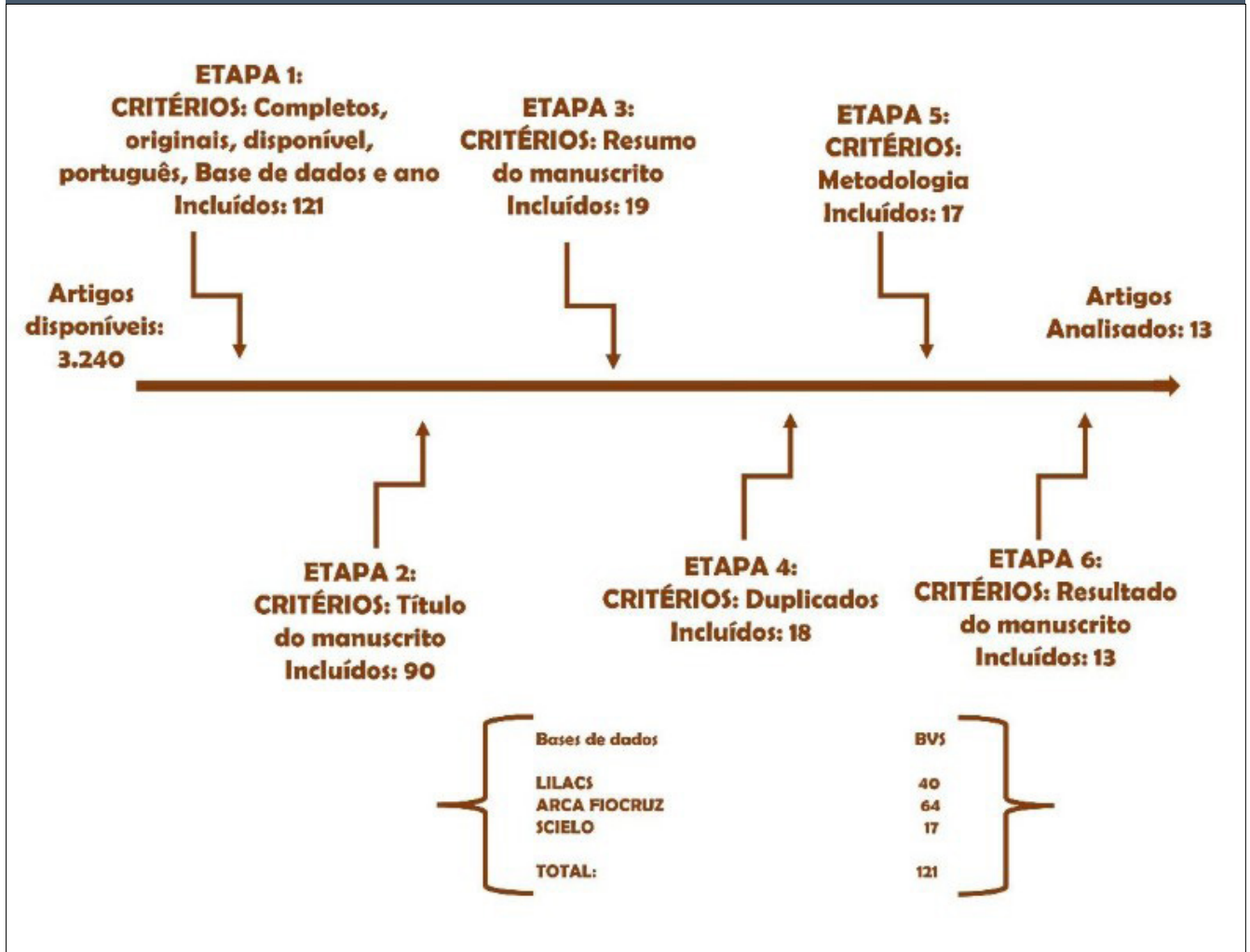
As this is an integrative literature review, it was not necessary to submit this study to an Ethics Committee, in accordance with Resolution No. 510/2016.

**Tabela 1: Resultados obtidos na seleção dos artigos para revisão integrativa conforme as etapas metodológicas.**

Database	Articles located	Articles selected by title	Articles selected by abstracts	Articles selected after exclusion of duplicates	Articles selected by results and types of methodology
Lilacs	40	16	15	14	10
ARCA- Fiocruz	64	2	1	1	1
Scielo	17	4	3	3	2
Total	121	22	19	18	13

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2023.

Figure 1: Manuscript selection scheme for the present study.



Source: Prepared by the authors, 2023.

## RESULTS

In the selected sample, thirteen (13) articles published in the Scielo, Lilacs, and Arca-Fiocruz databases were found to meet all the inclusion criteria for the study. Regarding the year of publication, all were published between 2021 and 2023. The articles were tabulated in a table prepared by the authors, where they were grouped by: title, objective, and signs and symptoms of anxiety in university students in the post-pandemic period.

Regarding the characteristics of the sample, in most studies, anxiety

symptoms prevailed among female students and young people between 21 and 28 years of age. The main findings of the studies are related to the high prevalence of anxiety among students.

All articles pointed to triggering and/or aggravating factors for the onset of anxiety symptoms. Among the most cited were being female, decreased academic performance, changes in teaching methodology, sleep disturbances, increased consumption of psychotropic substances, and sedentary lifestyles. In addition to these factors, social isolation, death of family members, risks of contam-

ination and infection, and loneliness among university students were also linked to psychological distress in some of the studies, albeit to a lesser extent.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the selected studies, according to the study titles, objectives, and anxiety signs and symptoms of university students in the post-pandemic period.

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**Table 1: Articles selected based on the methodology applied.**

TITLE/YEAR	OBJECTIVE	ANXIOUS SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD
Factors associated with anxiety, depression, and stress in medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic. 2022 <sup>(9)</sup> .	To analyze the factors associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress in medical students during the pandemic period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dissatisfaction with academic performance, feelings of frustration and boredom.</li> <li>▪ Worsening quality of life during the critical period of the pandemic.</li> <li>▪ Change in routines and incidence of insomnia.</li> <li>▪ Sedentary lifestyle</li> </ul>
Factors associated with anxiety/depression in medical students during social distancing due to COVID-19. 2022 <sup>(10)</sup> .	To determine the prevalence and factors associated with signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression in medical students during social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low academic performance among students.</li> <li>▪ Changes in sleep quality.</li> <li>▪ Reduction in leisure time.</li> </ul>
The Covid-19 pandemic: a traumatic event for students of Biological and Health Sciences and Health Sciences. 2023 <sup>(11)</sup> .	Check the mental load caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as a traumatic event to the point of triggering psychiatric disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in university students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fear of death of loved ones, of contamination and infection by COVID-19.</li> <li>▪ Sudden change in teaching methodology causing frustration among academics.</li> <li>▪ Social isolation has deepened experiences of loneliness.</li> <li>▪ Higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress.</li> </ul>
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of university students. 2023 <sup>(12)</sup> .	Assessing the mental health of students at a private higher education institution in the face of the pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fear, anxiety, and insecurity about the future.</li> <li>▪ Excessive concern about infecting family members with COVID-19.</li> <li>▪ Impaired sleep quality.</li> </ul>
Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the biopsychosocial aspects of university students in Paraíba: a cross-sectional study. 2022 <sup>(13)</sup> .	Analyze the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perception of learning, mental health, and quality of life of university students in Paraíba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Learning difficulties.</li> <li>▪ High scores on tests for signs of anxiety according to the DASS-21</li> <li>▪ Changes in sleep patterns</li> </ul>
Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of university students: the case of students at Rovuma University, Mozambique. 2022 <sup>(14)</sup> .	Assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of university students at Rovuma University in Mozambique.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ineffective learning</li> <li>▪ Signs of anxiety manifested by changes in the gastrointestinal system and excessive worry.</li> </ul>
Social distancing in the COVID-19 pandemic and the emotional state of university students: a descriptive-exploratory study. 2022 <sup>(15)</sup> .	To understand the experience of social distancing in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emotional state of university students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Overload of academic activities, generating excessive concern about the future.</li> <li>▪ Emotional instability</li> <li>▪ Depression</li> </ul>
Chronic pain, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in nursing students during the pandemic. 2022 <sup>(16)</sup> .	Identify manifestations of chronic pain (CP), anxiety, and depressive symptoms in nursing students at a federal public university during the pandemic, analyzing the association between these variables and describing the sociodemographic characteristics and lifestyle habits of the study population.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Emotional instability</li> <li>▪ High scores on anxiety level tests according to the DASS-21</li> <li>▪ Signs of anxiety manifested by chronic pain.</li> </ul>
COVID-19 and mental health: factors associated with depression, anxiety, and stress in a university community. 2022 <sup>(17)</sup> .	Identify factors associated with signs of anxiety, depression, and stress in a university community under social distancing measures during the health emergency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increased consumption of psychoactive substances during physical and social distancing measures was associated with high anxiety scores.</li> </ul>
Coronavirus Pandemic and Emergency Remote Teaching: Perception of the Impact on University Students' Well-being. 2021 <sup>(18)</sup> .	Investigate the perception of well-being and mental health among university students who participated in remote learning during quarantine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Emotional instability</li> <li>▪ Excessive concern about the future.</li> <li>▪ Impairment in academic development.</li> </ul>
Being a nursing student in times of COVID-19. 2021 <sup>(19)</sup> .	To understand how the pandemic has affected nursing students in clinical teaching contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fear of being infected and bringing the disease home.</li> <li>▪ Poor sleep quality.</li> <li>▪ Depression</li> </ul>
Social media and social support among nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional study. 2021 <sup>(20)</sup> .	Identify the types of social networks accessed and the perception of social support received by nursing students in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Impaired sleep quality</li> <li>▪ Emotional instability</li> <li>▪ Fear of COVID-19 infection</li> <li>▪ High levels of anxiety according to the DASS-21</li> </ul>
The impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Brazilian students. 2021 <sup>(21)</sup> .	The objective of this study was to investigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of Brazilian students through an online data survey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Loneliness</li> <li>▪ Worsening quality of life</li> <li>▪ Impaired sleep quality</li> <li>▪ Excessive concern about the future.</li> </ul>

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2023.

## DISCUSSION

When it comes to the manifestation of anxiety symptoms, studies show that they have always been present within the academic community, but have intensified after the pandemic. Studies report the presence of these symptoms in 53.8% of the academic population, in addition to a prevalence of 46.1%. These data show that more than half of students developed anxiety symptoms after the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>(12)</sup>.

In a study conducted with academics at a public university in 2019, it was found that conditions associated with anxiety symptoms were more related to academic variables, where the prevalence of severe anxiety symptoms was 62%, meaning that the mental health of academics was already compromised even before the pandemic, and was further aggravated by it<sup>(22)</sup>.

A negative impact of the pandemic on students' health was also observed in terms of social, biological, and emotional aspects of life. In a study of almost 6,000 students from all regions of Brazil, 60% reported anxiety attacks, 82% felt unmotivated, 79% had difficulty concentrating, and 62% had difficulty sleeping<sup>(23)</sup>.

It is known that when students enter the university environment, they begin to experience a more intense pace of life, with numerous factors that trigger anxiety symptoms, such as spending more time studying, less leisure time and contact with family, pressure to perform well academically, and irregular sleep patterns. In addition to these factors that already existed before the pandemic, the study in question observed the emergence of others related to it, such as social isolation, physical inactivity, use of psychoactive substances, fear, decreased performance due to sudden changes in the teaching methodology used until then, loneliness, and post-traumatic stress<sup>(22)</sup>.

When it comes to learning, anxiety symptoms were associated with changes

in teaching methodology in 31.25% of studies and, in 37.5%, with decreased academic performance<sup>(24)</sup>.

During the pandemic, the teaching and learning process was affected, largely due to social isolation, which paved the way for remote learning, generating significant impacts on the teaching and learning process and requiring students and teachers to reinvent themselves in their ways of learning and teaching. Studies indicate that academics recognized that remote teaching presented disadvantages in ensuring academic performance, indicating that they were unmotivated, stressed, misunderstood, and learning little<sup>(12,24)</sup>.

It is known that the higher the level of anxiety, the greater the damage to the individual in terms of cognitive aspects, generating unwanted reactions in the body, such as difficulty concentrating, "blinking out," restlessness, and headaches, and these effects caused by anxiety decrease overall performance, i.e., the higher the anxiety levels, the lower the academic performance. Thus, the methodological changes that became necessary during the isolation period triggered anxiety symptoms, which, in turn, may be associated with learning gaps in these students<sup>(25,26)</sup>.

Sleep disorders are important changes in the functioning of the sleep-wake cycle that culminate in significant impairments in daily activities and affect the biopsychosocial well-being of the individual. They are considered the main mental health problems associated with increased psychosocial stressors. Such stressors, such as uncertainty, isolation, and fears, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has consequently compromised sleep quality<sup>(27,28,29)</sup>.

Regarding sleep, the results table showed that poor sleep quality contributed to anxiety symptoms, which may have influenced sleep quality. Studies indicate that insomnia has been a predisposing factor for anxiety, and in the study, 46.5% of students reported wors-

ening sleep. This shows us that, depending on each case, sleep impairment can be a cause or consequence of anxious symptoms<sup>(9,12)</sup>.

Anxiety may be related to sleep disorders as etiological factors or complications. A study that sought to assess sleep quality and anxiety levels found that students with poor sleep quality had higher average levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than students with good sleep quality. A similar study conducted with health students showed that the sleep-wake cycle pattern directly influences the occurrence of anxiety symptoms<sup>(29,31)</sup>.

Increased consumption of psychotropic substances (alcohol and nicotine) was also associated with anxiety symptoms in academics, as evidenced by the results. Today, there is an increase in alcohol consumption among the academic population, which is responsible for the highest consumption of psychoactive substances, a behavior that is associated with high anxiety scores. Ramos et al (2023) Miotto et al (2022)

Social distancing and loneliness were other factors associated with anxiety symptoms in the results, where it was observed that the students' need to be isolated at that time contributed to the emergence of anxiety symptoms<sup>(23)</sup>.

In relation to physical activity, sedentary individuals were more prone to anxious symptoms. Due to social distancing because of the pandemic, many students had to interrupt their physical activities, thus becoming more susceptible to anxious symptoms<sup>(12)</sup>.

Just as important as all the factors mentioned so far is the coexistence of psychological manifestations. In none of the articles reviewed did the authors observe only the presence of anxious symptoms, but also their association with depressive symptoms, fear, and stress, for example.

In most of them, students presented, in addition to anxiety, depressive symptoms, stress, fear, frustration, and boredom. In a study conducted with

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university students in the health field, a correlation was found between depressive and anxiety symptoms and stress, and the more severe the symptoms, the worse the quality of life. In addition, 50% of the participants presented all three manifestations<sup>(28)</sup>.

Symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression are interconnected phenomena that are strongly associated and have a negative impact on the learning and academic performance of university students. Because they are closely associated, these comorbidities potentiate and aggravate symptoms, as they end up sharing triggers and symptom subtypes.

More debate is needed on the mental health of university students in order to improve their conditions, reduce these high levels, and provide the necessary support from educational institutions. Therefore, strategies must be developed

to enable the academic community to better cope with life's setbacks and minimize their impact<sup>(13,32)</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Emotional instability was related to various aspects of students' lives during the pandemic, causing anxiety and fear, as their concerns were not only about their academic life but also about their family members, friends, and loved ones who, at that time, were exposed to this virus, about which little was known.

The study found that the changes brought about by the pandemic favored the emergence of anxiety symptoms in academics, such as social distancing, increased consumption of psychoactive substances, changes in teaching methodology, sedentary lifestyles, decreased academic performance, and sleep distur-

bances.

Understanding the signs and symptoms of anxiety manifested by university students in the post-pandemic period provides insight into their mental health, given that university can be a trigger for other psychiatric disorders. Thus, nursing plays an important role in the prevention and promotion of mental health in the university environment through lectures and courses aimed at both the academic community and faculty, thereby contributing to reducing the incidence of anxiety cases among university students in Brazil.

This study contributed to understanding the current scenario of anxiety signs and symptoms expressed by university students in the post-pandemic period. It is hoped that this study will serve as a basis for further research on the subject.

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