

Between Work and Training: Coping Strategies of Nursing Students

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Entre el Trabajo y la Formación: Estrategias de Afrontamiento de Estudiantes de Enfermería

RESUMO

Objetivo: Compreender as estratégias de enfrentamento utilizadas por graduandos de enfermagem que conciliam trabalho e formação acadêmica. **Método:** Estudo qualitativo, exploratório, realizado com 13 estudantes de enfermagem que exerciam atividade profissional durante a graduação. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e analisados segundo a análise de conteúdo temática. **Resultados:** Emergiram cinco categorias: fragmentação do tempo, demandas acadêmicas intensas, estratégias adaptativas, privação de sono e sofrimento emocional, e recursos de enfrentamento. Observou-se que os estudantes utilizam estratégias individuais para manter a permanência no curso, porém com impactos significativos na saúde física e mental. **Conclusão:** As estratégias de enfrentamento mostram-se fundamentais para a continuidade da formação, entretanto estão associadas a custos elevados à saúde dos estudantes, evidenciando a necessidade de suporte institucional.

DESCRIPTORES: Educação em enfermagem; Estudantes; Saúde mental; Trabalho; Estresse psicológico.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand coping strategies used by nursing students who balance work and academic training. **Method:** Qualitative, exploratory study conducted with 13 nursing students who worked during their academic training. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic content analysis. **Results:** Five categories emerged: time fragmentation, academic demands, adaptive strategies, sleep deprivation and emotional distress, and coping resources. Students used individual strategies to remain in the course, but with significant health impacts. **Conclusion:** Coping strategies are essential for academic continuity but are associated with negative health outcomes, highlighting the need for institutional support.

DESCRIPTORS: Nursing education; Students; Mental health; Work; Psychological stress.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender las estrategias de afrontamiento utilizadas por estudiantes de enfermería que concilian trabajo y formación académica. **Método:** Estudio cualitativo, exploratorio, realizado con 13 estudiantes de enfermería que trabajaban durante la graduación. Los datos fueron recolectados mediante entrevistas y analizados mediante análisis de contenido. **Resultados:** Surgieron cinco categorías: fragmentación del tiempo, demandas académicas, estrategias adaptativas, privación del sueño y sufrimiento emocional, y recursos de afrontamiento. **Conclusión:** Las estrategias permiten la continuidad académica, pero con impactos negativos en la salud, evidenciando la necesidad de apoyo institucional.

DESCRIPTORES: Educación en enfermería; Estudiantes; Salud mental; Trabajo; Estrés psicológico.

RECEIVED: 06/10/2026 APROVADO EM: 07/16/2026

How to cite this article: Guilhermino EJ, Nogueira GS, Camillo SO, Esperança VP, Moretto SA, Puccia MIR, Lopes SG, Fernandes IC. Between Work and Training: Coping Strategies of Nursing Students. *Saúde Coletiva (Brazilian Edition)* [Internet]. 2026 [cited year month day]; 18 (111):20620-20633. Available from: DOI: 10.36489/saudecoletiva.2026v18i111p20620-20633

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INTRODUCTION

Changes in the world of work have significantly impacted the healthcare field, especially nursing, which is characterized by long work hours, high emotional demands, and constant technical and scientific requirements. In this context, there has been an increase in the number of technical and nursing assistant professionals pursuing a bachelor's degree while balancing work and academic studies.

Nursing education is recognized for its heavy course load and complexity, involving theoretical and practical activities as well as supervised clinical placements, which can exceed 4,000 hours, according to current educational guidelines¹. When combined with a weekly work schedule—often between 36 and 40 hours—this reality creates a scenario of biopsychosocial overload for the working student.

In addition to academic demands, nursing students are exposed to situations involving suffering, pain, illness, and death, which can intensify emotional and psychological strain. These factors, combined with personal and financial demands, contribute to the emergence of stressors that hinder ad-

aptation to the academic and professional context and may directly impact these individuals' performance and mental health².

The overlap of academic and work demands can result in high levels of stress, anxiety, and impaired psychological well-being among nursing students, especially those who enter the workforce early³. In this scenario, the difficulty of balancing multiple demands encourages the adoption of individual coping strategies, often based on sleep deprivation, intense time management, and the use of stimulants.

In light of Occupational Psychodynamics, it is understood that suffering arises when there is a mismatch between institutional demands and the individual's actual capacity to respond to them. From this perspective, work can assume both a structuring and a pathogenic role, depending on the conditions under which it is performed⁴. When the strategies employed by individuals are insufficient to transform this distress, it can become pathogenic, directly impacting physical and mental health⁴.

Thus, working nursing students employ various defense strategies to cope with the distress resulting from

their dual workload, seeking to preserve their psychological balance in the face of the demands imposed by their education and work⁴. However, such strategies often function more as mechanisms of adaptation than as means of transforming the conditions that produce the distress.

Given this context, we are interested in knowing: What coping strategies are used by nursing students who balance work and academic training?

Understanding how nursing students who work and face both academic and work demands cope is essential for analyzing the impacts of this dual workload on their health, performance, and retention in the program.

Accordingly, this study aims to understand the coping strategies used by undergraduate nursing students who balance work and academic studies.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study conducted at the FMABC University Center, located in the São Paulo metropolitan area.

Qualitative research allows for an understanding of the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of par-

ticipants within their social context, making it suitable for investigating complex phenomena related to work and health education⁵.

The theoretical framework adopted was the Psychodynamics of Work, proposed by Christophe Dejours, which enables an analysis of the relationship between work organization, psychological distress, and the coping strategies employed by the participants⁴.

Thirteen students in their final year of the undergraduate nursing program participated in the study; they had been working as nursing technicians or aides throughout their academic training. The study included students who were regularly enrolled and balancing work and study; those who were not employed or who declined to participate in the research were excluded.

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private setting, with an average duration of 20 minutes, following the participants' informed consent. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in full. Participants were identified by alphanumeric codes (E1 to E13) to ensure anonymity.

For data analysis, we used the thematic content analysis technique proposed by Bardin, following the stages of pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and processing of the results⁶. Initially, we conducted a skimming reading of the interviews, followed by the identification of units of meaning, grouping into thematic categories, and subsequent interpretation in light of the adopted theoretical framework.

The study followed the established criteria for qualitative research (COREQ), ensuring methodological rigor in the conduct, analysis, and presentation of the data⁷.

Ethical considerations were adhered to in accordance with Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Com-

mittee (CEP No. 7.619.492; CAAE 88505925.2.0000.0082).

RESULTS

Thirteen nursing students aged between 23 and 42 years participated in the study, constituting a predominantly young adult group. Regarding gender, twelve were female and one was male. With regard to marital status, six participants were married, three were single, two were divorced, and two reported being in a stable relationship. Regarding length of professional practice, experience ranged from 4 to 15 years, with an average of 6.7 years of practice, indicating that most already had an established career in the field of nursing. As for their practice settings, four worked in Primary Care/Community Health Centers (UBS); three in the Operating Room (two in an Ophthalmic Operating Room and one in a Dermatological Operating Room); three in Urgent and Emergency Care; one in the Emergency Room; one in the Emergency Department; one in a Long-Term Care Facility for the Elderly (ILPI); one in the Human Reproduction sector; and one in a cosmetic clinic. With regard to household income, it ranged from two minimum wages to approximately fifteen thousand reais per month. Regarding religion, eight participants identified as Evangelical, two as Catholic, and three reported having no religion. As for the mode of transportation used to get to college, ten used their own vehicle and three used the bus. Regarding financial aid or scholarships to cover tuition, eight participants had a full scholarship (100%), three had a partial scholarship (30% or 50%), and two used student loans. As for work hours, six participants work 40 hours per week, while six others work 30 hours per week and one works 44 hours per week. Analysis of the data allowed for the identification of five thematic categories.

FRAGMENTATION OF TIME IN ORGANIZING STUDIES

Participants reported difficulty establishing a structured study routine, organizing their activities in a fragmented manner, depending on their availability.

I study whenever I can, usually during breaks or at night (E1).

I don't have a set schedule; I study whenever I have time (E3).

The fragmentation of time emerges as a central strategy for adapting to the dual workload, highlighting the absence of continuous periods for studying. This dynamic reveals a process of constant reorganization of the routine, in which students adjust their activities according to the demands of work and academic life, which can compromise the quality of learning and increase feelings of being overwhelmed.

INTENSE ACADEMIC DEMANDS

Academic activities were identified as significant sources of stress, especially those requiring greater dedication and consistency.

The final thesis is very demanding and time-consuming (E9).

Exams are difficult because there is so much material to cover (E2).

Intense academic demands, combined with limited available time, intensify students' perception of being overwhelmed. Activities that require greater concentration are often postponed or rushed, highlighting difficulties in balancing work and education and potentially impacting academic performance.

ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES FOR BALANCING STUDY AND WORK

Students reported using individual strategies to cope with the demands of juggling both work and school, such as getting ahead on assignments and making the most of short breaks to study.

I try to get everything done ahead of time on the weekend (E6).

I take advantage of any free time to study (E8).

These strategies demonstrate an attempt to adapt to the imposed demands, revealing a continuous effort to maintain academic performance. However, these are predominantly individual strategies that do not alter the structural conditions that generate the overload, functioning more as survival mechanisms than as solutions to the problem.

SLEEP DEPRIVATION AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Reduced rest time was widely reported, associated with symptoms of exhaustion, anxiety, and emotional distress.

I've thought about giving up several times (E2).

I have anxiety attacks and can't sleep (E5).

Sleep deprivation emerges as one of the main consequences of the double workload, being directly related to emotional distress. This scenario highlights a process of progressive burnout, in which students compromise their basic needs to meet academic and work demands, putting their physical and mental health at risk.

COPING STRATEGIES AND MAINTAINING EMOTIONAL BALANCE

Participants reported seeking strategies for emotional relief, such as religious practice, physical activity, family support, and psychological counseling.

Going to church is my outlet (E5).

I go to therapy every week (E10).

These coping resources demonstrate the use of strategies aimed at preserving emotional balance. These practices function as mechanisms for psychological support and reorganization, allowing students to cope with daily stress. However, as observed in the other categories, such strategies remain at the individual level and are insufficient to change the structural conditions that cause suffering.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that balancing work and academic training in nursing is a complex process, characterized by overload, fragmented time, and significant impacts on students' physical and mental health. overlap of academic, work, and personal demands reveals a daily life marked by simultaneous demands, in which working students must constantly reorganize their routines to meet multiple responsibilities, corroborating studies that point to high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout among health science students³.

Students who work as nursing technicians or aides experience the overlap of work shifts, academic activities, and family responsibilities, revealing a daily life marked by multiple demands and the constant need to reorganize their time. This fragmentation of time is not merely a matter of scheduling or routine, but a concrete expression of the organizational conditions of contemporary work⁸.

Recent literature has shown that nursing students exhibit a high prevalence of psychological distress, especially when exposed to a double workload. Symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion are frequently reported and are associated with an overload of activities and difficulty balancing academic and professional life⁹. In this context, academic burnout has been described as a growing phenomenon, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal fulfillment, which reinforces this group's vulnerability to the demands of their education¹⁰.

The fragmentation of time, identified as one of the main coping strategies, highlights not only a difficulty with individual organization but, above all, a reflection of the structural conditions imposed by the double

workload⁴. Students report that it is impossible to establish consistent study routines, forcing them to make use of fragmented intervals throughout the day. This dynamic compromises fundamental cognitive processes, such as concentration, memorization, and knowledge construction, directly impacting the quality of learning.

From the perspective of Psychodynamics of Work, this fragmentation can be understood as an adaptive strategy in the face of institutional demands, in which the individual reorganizes their activities to meet these demands, even at the expense of their psychological well-being⁴. In this sense, time ceases to be an organizing resource and becomes a source of tension, contributing to the intensification of suffering and a sense of inadequacy in the face of academic and work demands.

Dejours points out that suffering arises when there is a mismatch between the demands of the prescribed work and the individual's actual capacity to meet those demands. In the context of the participants, it is observed that, in addition to professional demands, there is a need to fulfill academic and family obligations, further increasing time pressure. This multiplicity of roles fosters a constant sense of inadequacy, since time never seems sufficient to fully address all spheres of life⁴.

Intense academic demands, especially those related to activities requiring greater cognitive effort—such as the final thesis, assessments, and clinical practicums—were identified as significant sources of stress. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that nursing education involves a high degree of complexity, requiring students not only to master technical and scientific knowledge but also to develop emotional and interpersonal skills, which increases the burden of demands during the educational process¹¹.

Furthermore, the need to simultaneously juggle theoretical and practical

activities, combined with the responsibility of providing care in the workplace, contributes to increased stress and psychological pressure. This reality reinforces the idea that the working student occupies a unique position, in which the boundaries between education and work become blurred, exacerbating physical and emotional exhaustion. In this context, the educational process comes to be experienced not only as a space for learning but also as a continuous source of tension and demands¹².

From the perspective of Psychodynamics of Work, it is possible to understand that the distress experienced by students is not limited to task overload but is directly related to the construction of their professional identity. During their training, nursing students are constantly confronted with institutional and social expectations that demand performance, responsibility, and resilience, often under adverse conditions. This process can generate internal conflicts, as the individual seeks to meet the demands of the professional role while simultaneously dealing with their own limitations. The construction of professional identity in nursing is associated with experiences of stress and distress, especially when there is no adequate support during the training process¹³.

With regard to adaptive strategies, it was observed that students predominantly resort to individual mechanisms, such as planning ahead for tasks, reorganizing their time, and making use of short breaks for studying. Although such strategies allow for the continuation of their education, they do not address the structural conditions that cause the overload. Various individual practices are employed to cope with the demands of balancing work and study in nursing education. Among these practices are waking up earlier to study, recording lectures to review later, creating summaries and flashcards, getting a head start on assignments,

and taking advantage of available moments to complete academic activities. These initiatives demonstrate attempts to reorganize daily routines and adapt to the overlapping academic and practical demands of the program¹⁴.

When coping strategies remain at the individual level, they tend to function as defense mechanisms, allowing the individual to endure suffering without transforming it. In this scenario, the strategies reported by students—such as concentrating activities on weekends, completing assignments close to deadlines, and giving up extracurricular activities—can be understood as ways of coping with the simultaneous demands of work and academic studies⁴. According to the Psychodynamics of Work, working students develop individual or collective defense strategies with the aim of making suffering bearable and maintaining the continuity of their activities. Thus, students mobilize subjective resources to cope with the pressures imposed by the dual workload, seeking to balance professional and academic demands to ensure they remain in the program and continue their professional trajectory⁴.

However, it is important to note that working students often resort to self-regulated learning strategies, in which they organize their own study time, set learning goals, and use different cognitive strategies to cope with academic demands and improve their performance throughout their education¹⁵. Furthermore, prior professional experience stands out as a factor that helps students cope with the demands of their education, allowing for greater familiarity with situations encountered in the healthcare setting and facilitating the understanding of content covered in the undergraduate program. This integration of practical experience and academic learning can enhance the educational process, as it enables students to interpret theoretical content in light of concrete situa-

tions encountered in their daily professional lives¹⁶.

Different learning strategies and styles adopted by nursing students are associated with the development of clinical competencies, indicating that the way students organize their learning process can directly influence their ability to apply knowledge in the context of clinical practice¹⁷.

Distress arises when there is a mismatch between the organization's demands and the individual's actual ability to meet them. In this context, the strategies reported—such as reorganizing time, developing personal study methods, and using professional experience as a learning resource—can be understood as attempts to adapt to the pressures of a double workload. However, although these practices demonstrate the students' capacity for subjective mobilization and resilience, they also reveal that the management of difficulties tends to be individualized, with the responsibility for balancing institutional demands—which often exceed their concrete constraints of time and availability—falling primarily on the students themselves⁴.

Sleep deprivation and emotional distress emerge as central consequences of the dual workload, often associated with symptoms such as exhaustion, anxiety, irritability, and the desire to drop out. These findings corroborate evidence from the literature pointing to sleep deprivation as one of the main risk factors for mental health problems among college students, as it is linked to reduced cognitive performance, increased stress, and adverse effects on overall health (9). Furthermore, the use of stimulants, such as caffeine, reflects attempts to compensate for fatigue and maintain academic performance—a practice that can further exacerbate anxiety and sleep disorders¹⁸.

Another relevant aspect concerns the use of pharmacological and therapeutic interventions, as well as stimulants, as a way to cope with the

demands of daily life. The use of medications, energy drinks, and caffeine—along with changes in eating behavior and other habits—appears to be an attempt to maintain performance and cope with physical and mental fatigue, while some students turn to psychological counseling as a self-care strategy³. Nursing students who consume energy drinks report shorter sleep duration and poorer sleep quality, as well as higher levels of perceived stress¹⁹. Caffeine consumption is widespread among college students and is associated with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression¹⁸. Healthcare students use psychostimulants, such as methylphenidate, to improve academic performance, often without a prescription; this practice is associated with adverse effects such as insomnia, agitation, and symptoms of anxiety and depression, highlighting significant risks to physical and mental health²⁰.

With regard to coping mechanisms, practices such as religious faith, physical activity, family support, and psychological counseling were highlighted as important strategies for maintaining emotional balance. These findings are consistent with studies that identify social support as a significant protective factor, capable of reducing the impact of stress and promoting greater adaptation to the academic environment²¹. However, although these strategies contribute to alleviating distress, they are not sufficient to change the conditions that cause it.

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that the issue highlighted in this study should not be understood exclusively as an individual matter, but as a phenomenon involving institutional and structural dimensions. The literature indicates that higher education institutions still face limitations in implementing policies to support working students, which contributes to the persistence of educational conditions that can potentially lead to ill health²². In this regard, institutional

strategies such as curricular flexibility, psycho-pedagogical support programs, and initiatives aimed at promoting mental health have been considered fundamental for reducing suffering and improving the academic experience²³.

In light of the Psychodynamics of Work, this scenario can be interpreted as a process of normalizing suffering, in which the individual internalizes the demands of the context and comes to regard as natural conditions that are, in reality, potentially harmful to health⁴. This process contributes to the invisibilization of suffering and to the perpetuation of practices that compromise students' health.

Thus, the results of this study show that continuing in the undergraduate nursing program, for working students, is often associated with a high cost, expressed in sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, and emotional distress. This reality points to the need to critically examine the current educational paradigm, which often values the ability to "handle everything" without considering the impacts of this demand on students' health.

In this regard, it is essential to broaden the perspective on nursing education by incorporating institutional strategies that recognize the specific needs of working students. The implementation of support policies, more flexible academic requirements, psychological counseling, and initiatives aimed at promoting mental health can contribute to the creation of a healthier and more sustainable educational environment.

Finally, it should be emphasized that understanding the coping strategies used by students should not be limited to an analysis of their individual capacities but must, above all, consider the structural conditions that cause their suffering. Only from this perspective will it be possible to advance in the development of educational practices that not only ensure

student retention but also promote the health and well-being of future nursing professionals.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study revealed that balancing work and academic training in nursing is a process marked by intense demands and a constant need for adaptation. Working students experience a daily life permeated by overload, in which time management, rest, and self-care are frequently compromised.

The coping strategies identified prove to be fundamental for remaining in the program, highlighting the students' continuous effort to meet academic and work demands. However, these strategies largely come at the cost of sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, and emotional distress, revealing a scenario in which adaptation occurs under conditions that are potentially harmful to health.

It is noteworthy that the resources mobilized by students are predominantly individual in nature, aimed at maintaining emotional balance and organizing their daily routines, without, however, bringing about changes in the structural conditions that cause the overload. This aspect highlights the need to broaden the perspective on nursing education, considering not only academic performance but also the living conditions and health of working students.

In this regard, it is essential to develop institutional strategies that foster academic retention in a healthier manner, including more flexible academic requirements, pedagogical support, and initiatives aimed at promoting mental health. Creating an educational environment that is more attuned to the specific needs of these students can contribute to a more sustainable education aligned with the principles of comprehensive care.

As limitations of the study, it should

be noted that, since this is a qualitative study conducted in a specific context, the results cannot be generalized. Furthermore, the research focused exclusively on students in the nursing field,

not covering other realities of working students.

Finally, we emphasize the importance of conducting further studies to deepen our understanding of the reali-

ties faced by working students, as well as investigating institutional interventions capable of minimizing the identified impacts and promoting better educational conditions.

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