

## Detection of psychological needs in university students due to confinement during the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic

## Detección de necesidades psicológicas en universitarios por confinamiento durante la tercera ola de la COVID-19

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### Abstract:

The confinement due to COVID-19 pandemic and the change in the educational modality and has led university students to experience several psychological alterations that require their timely assessment and diagnose. Therefore, the objective of this research was to identify psychological needs during confinement due to the third wave of COVID-19 in university students, to lay the foundations for the future design of a specific intervention in this population and contribute to their comprehensive health. This investigation is part of a larger study. With a non-experimental, cross-sectional design and a non-probabilistic quota sampling, five male and female university students participated. Data collection was done individually through synchronous semi-structured interview script through a digital platform. Participation was informed and consented in accordance with the Psychologist's Code of Ethics. It was found that male and female university students experience academic stress, negative feelings, decrease in their social relationships, family problems, inability to organize and insomnia, for which the physical, psychological and social health of this population is at stake, being necessary designed intervention programs from health psychology that consider breathing and relaxation techniques as well as problem solving to address academic stress, anxiety symptoms and associated variables.

### Keywords:

COVID-19 pandemic, academic stress, insomnia, anxiety, confinement

### Resumen:

El confinamiento por la COVID-19 y el cambio en la modalidad educativa ha llevado a los universitarios a experimentar diversas alteraciones psicológicas que requieren de su evaluación y diagnóstico oportuno. Por tanto, el objetivo de la presente investigación fue identificar necesidades psicológicas durante el confinamiento por la tercera ola de la COVID-19 en estudiantes universitarios, para sentar las bases del diseño futuro de una intervención específica dirigida a esta población y coadyuvar en su salud integral. La presente investigación es parte de un estudio más amplio. Con un diseño no experimental, transversal y un muestreo no probabilístico por cuota participaron cinco universitarios hombres y mujeres. La recolección de los datos se hizo de manera individual a través de un guion para entrevistas semiestructuradas, mismas que se llevaron a cabo de manera síncrona por una plataforma digital. La participación fue informada y consentida apegada al Código Ético del Psicólogo. Se encontró que, los universitarios hombres y mujeres experimentan estrés académico, sentimientos negativos, disminución de sus relaciones sociales, problemas familiares, incapacidad de organización e insomnio, por lo que se encuentra en juego la salud física, psicológica y social de esta población, siendo necesarias intervenciones oportunas diseñadas desde la psicología de la salud que consideren técnicas de respiración y relajación así como solución de problemas para el abordaje del estrés académico, la ansiedad y variables asociadas.

### Palabras Clave:

COVID-19, estrés académico, insomnio, ansiedad, confinamiento social

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## INTRODUCTION

During the professional training, the individual is integrated into a lifestyle with various responsibilities beyond the academic, in this regard Ramírez and Maturana (2018) argue that university life is a process in which the student must acquire reorganization skills based on learning strategies, relational dynamics and concatenating previous learning with current learning, representing an arduous process that involves facing a series of challenges that can alter the psychological stability and impact the educational and personal trajectory, both present and future. In this regard, during university life, the social aspect plays an important role, because if the social context is favorable, it will promote positive experiences in the individual; but if they are unfavorable, they can affect other aspects (e.g., physics and psychology; Cajas et al., 2020).

Currently, the global health condition due to the pandemic of the illness caused by the coronavirus that began at the end of 2019 (COVID-19) is having an impact on the social and psychological aspects of all living beings, in the case of human beings, more specifically in university students, due to two important events: confinement and the change in the teaching modality from face-to-face to online. Narváez, Obando, Hernández and De La Cruz (2021) documented that the greatest impacts on the university population have been changes in already established routines, in addition to less autonomy and relationships that were affected by restricting social interaction becoming a stress factor. While, in the psychological aspect, Prada, Gamboa and Hernández (2021) report in university students and teachers the presence of levels of mild depression with feelings of sadness, tension, tiredness, increased appetite or sleep disturbances, as well as levels of anxiety elevated. Bautista-Díaz et al. (2021) detected in 50.0% of a sample of university students' symptoms of depression from moderate to severe, while in anxiety the percentage was higher (81.9%) and half of the sample (50%) presented clinically relevant stress perception. For this reason, Bravo, Parra, and Silva (2021) affirm that, among university students, mental health in general and quality of life have been affected.

The Ministry of Health (2020) of the country called on health professionals to serve the population during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the case of health psychologists, their participation is a priority, therefore, higher education institutions in health areas directed their attention to the university community. Given that psychological alterations are experienced differently, the identification of psychological needs in university students becomes relevant during the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when non-essential activities in confinement still prevail. Therefore, the objective of this research was to carry out a detection of psychological needs during confinement due to the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic in university students, to lay the foundations for the design of a specific intervention in this population and contribute to its overall health.

## METHOD

### *Design*

Non-experimental-transversal, since variables were not intentionally manipulated and the evaluation was done in a

single moment without pretending to see the evolution of the variables over time (Ato et al., 2013; Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

### *Participants*

With an intentional non-probabilistic sampling by quota and consecutive type, five university students (three women and two men) from different careers of a public university participated. For the preservation of the identity and confidentiality of the data in the future they will be identified with a number (1 to 5). For the selection of the sample, the consented and informed participation of undergraduate students was taken as an inclusion criterion.

### *Means of data collection*

Semi-structured interviews were carried out, Díaz, Torruco, Martínez, and Varela (2013) maintain that in these types of interviews are the key part of a script that directs the collection of information, since it has greater flexibility than the structured interviews, because they start from questions posed with the possibility of delving into the answers and adjusting to the interviewees. The script was made by consensus among the researchers of this paper. To gather information about the psychological needs generated during confinement by the COVID-19 pandemic, the following variables were considered: mental health, behavioral reaction; cognitive reaction; physiological reaction; school and social needs (friends and family) and to gather information in terms of percentages, questions with a closed response option were included before the open questions.

### *Procedure*

This study is part of a broader investigation, which will lay the foundations for the design of a psychological intervention. In the first place, a direct invitation was made to the university students to participate in the study, later, the objective and procedure of the investigation were explained to them, and they were asked to sign an informed consent attached to the Code of Ethics of the Psychologist (Mexican Society of Psychology, 2010), this research that was approved by the filiation institution author's. Due to health conditions, the interviews were carried out synchronously on the Zoom platform. As a reward for the participants, they were invited to join an intervention program to reduce academic stress.

### *Data analysis*

A descriptive analysis was carried out, based on the conceptualization of Sánchez, Blas, and Tujague (2010) who indicate that this type of analysis is a useful tool in different disciplines, which highlights where and how the information is presented with the purpose of interpreting the data and highlighting the needs perceived by the participants.

## RESULTS

### *Response time during interviews*

For Participant 1, the conversation took 40 minutes; for Participant 2, the meeting took 17 minutes. For Participant 3 a response time of 37 minutes was required. As for Participant 4, the interview lasted 23 minutes, and finally, for Participant 5, the interview lasted 21 minutes. As for Participants 1 and 4, the time was longer due to connection failures. In any case, the average response time was 27 minutes.

### ***Sociodemographic data of the participants***

The sociodemographic data at the time of the interview are as follows: Participant 1. 23-year-old male, single, studying in the 7th semester of a psychology career. Participant 2, a 27-year-old single man, is studying the 7th semester of his psychology career. Participant 3, a 20-year-old single woman, who is studying in 7th semester of administration career. Participants 4 and 5 are single 21-year-old women who is studying in the 7th semester of Psychology career.

### ***Knowledges about health psychology***

To assess the level of knowledge of mental health and the discipline in charge of it, it was found that a higher percentage has little knowledge about mental health, 3 people (60%), compared to those who consider that they have a lot of knowledge, 2 (40%). While 2 participants (40%) have little knowledge about Health Psychology and 2 participants (40%) have a lot of knowledge and one (20%) of these has no knowledge about it.

When it was openly inquiring about the concept of mental health, the majority, four of the participants (80%) mentioned that it is a state of emotional well-being, and the psychologist is the professional who must attend to it in a timely manner in case it is altered to avoid further complications. The participant from the administration career mentioned that she obtained information about mental health from social networks.

Regarding the knowledge about health psychology, as expected, four Psychology students (80%) mentioned that it oversees disease prevention and care for the maintenance of physical and mental health. In addition, this professional intervenes when the disease complicates adherence to treatment or affects quality of life. The participant from the administration career mentioned that she did not know about that distinction. In this research, the intervention of the health psychologist becomes timely due to the presence of a physical illness (COVID-19).

### ***Topics to address in a workshop from health psychology***

The majority, three of the interviewees (60%) indicated that the workshop should take into account how to manage general and academic stress, and the anxiety derived from confinement by COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to how to regulate emotions, behaviors and psychoeducation about of sanitary measures; while, one participant (20%) proposed addressing strategies to rest or fall asleep; and another participant (20%) indicated that chronic-degenerative diseases in general should be addressed. 100% of the interviewees referred that an intervention through a workshop would be very useful in these times, not only among university students.

### ***Behavioral Reaction***

Regarding the frequency with which they presented behavioral reactions due to confinement by COVID-19 pandemic, the majority (80%) indicated that they had many behavioral changes; on the other hand, 60% presented total isolation, finally, a higher percentage (60%) had many problems with their family or friends.

With the purpose of expanding what is related to isolation, 2 (40%) mentioned that the pandemic further decreased their social interaction, including not answering messages on social networks, being the tool that is mostly used to communicate today.

Regarding behaviors, the participants indicated that have experienced the inability to organize daily activities, panic (tremors, sweating, restlessness, and tics) when speaking in public way, decreased sleep hours, and disruption of their schedules and routines. In addition, the majority (80%) of the participants reported that, during the online class modality, they do more activities or academic tasks than before when their classes were face-to-face and that exhausts them. However, one participant said that a positive behavior that originated from the confinement was organization, since she does not waste time moving around.

Most of the interviewees (80%) mentioned that they had more discussions with their relatives than with their friends, due to the longer time they spent together, since, before the pandemic, they did not interact for much time with their family. However, one participant mentioned not having any family or friendship problems.

### ***Cognitive-affective reaction***

Regarding the frequency and type of feelings with which cognitive-affective reactions occur, such as feelings experienced during the period of confinement by COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that 100% of the participants have negative feelings most of the time, but 80% of the participants occasionally have positive feelings.

Among the positive feelings are tranquility, happiness, and joy for living with their relatives or sentimental partner. On the contrary, regarding negative feelings, the participants reported feeling sadness because their plans were hindered, bewilderment about the future and a tendency to think about the possibility of losing loved ones. They also reported a high level of stress (muscular tension, difficulty relaxing and restlessness) in their school situation, in addition to experiencing feelings of frustration, irritability, anguish, anger and disappointment. Since the online classes do not meet their expectations and they feel that they do not learn the same as in the education face-to-face modality.

Whit respect to the ask for psychological support during the confinement, a participant (at the time of the interview) reported that she assists to a psychologist because her stress levels have risen and felt various physical alterations.

### ***Physiological or health reactions***

Concerning the changes in the sleep cycle because of the COVID-19 confinement, although in most cases it has been infrequent, one participant said that he very often has sleep disturbances. In either of the two cases (rarely or very frequently), they sleep for a few hours, due to various academic activities that they must attend to, so they go to bed later. One participant expressed experiencing a tendency to wake up early in the morning and had difficulties falling asleep during the period of their adaptation to online classes; and one more participant said that she has spent up to a whole day without sleeping because of doing and fulfilling academic activities or, on the contrary, on occasions she has slept during the day because she felt sleepless or tired, which disrupts her activities and makes her feel nervousness.

Now, about health problems that arose from cCOVID-19 confinement, participant 1 presented generalized tiredness, for that reason he had to go to the doctor referring to a generalized deterioration of physical health.

### School and social needs

Given that all the participants had to move to an online teaching modality, most considered it to be a useful alternative to continue classes considering the current conditions due to the pandemic. However, two participants said that they observe a lack of planning by teachers for their online activities, which is why they feel annoyed or frustrated.

Most of the interviewees mentioned that they have experienced obstacles of a technical nature, such as poor internet connection or lack of resources to optimize or acquire their technological tools. In another participant, an obstacle has been the lack of organization, and another mentioned that she has experienced a lack of motivation and disappointment for not being able to carry out her professional practices in face-to-face settings. For the reasons described above, the participants have considered the temporary or permanent withdrawal of their studies, either due to the affectation of their personal or academic life, due to the little social interaction, both with professors and classmates, although they have given up because their relatives disagree. Finally, most of the participants do not have social relationships, since they stopped seeing their classmates or sentimental partners and it makes them feel sad.

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was detecting of psychological needs during the confinement of the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic in university students, to lay the foundations for the design of a specific intervention in this population and contribute to their comprehensive health.

In this study, university students reported inability to organize and insomnia, which is in line with what was reported by Campos et al. (2020) in university students from Peru and with González-Jaimes et al. (2021) in Mexican university students. Another alteration reported by university students is stage fright (tremors, nervousness when speaking, sweating and tics) when making presentations online, this finding is similar to that reported in university students from Colombia, who added that these alterations generated feelings of sadness and tension (Prada et al., 2021), and in a sample of Mexican university students, since almost 50% of the population reported feeling sadness (Fernández, 2021); Likewise, important changes in routine were reported, which alters their daily life, as previously documented (Narváez et al., 2021). These findings coincide with those found in university students in Chile (Guzmán-Muñoz et al., 2022), since it was determined that physical and psychological health is highly affected, so regardless of geographic location during the pandemic, psychological health has been affected.

In the family dimension, a greater discussion of university students with their relatives was reported, in this regard, in a study with students from a university of Mexico, the presence of physical and psychological violence derived from confinement was found, where the authors explain that such behavior is aggravated in small spaces (Robles et al., 2021). Likewise, it was documented that complaints of domestic violence during confinement have increased by 35% (Robles et al., 2020).

Now, the greater number of tasks and academic activities that university students during online classes has made them feel muscular tension, they have experienced a decrease in the hours of sleep to complete their tasks, difficulty relaxing and restlessness before their academic situation, argued that it is due

to the lack of planning and mastery of technologies by teachers and students themselves, for which they have come to think of temporarily or definitively withdrawing because they feel overwhelmed by the situation, in this regard, stress, *per se*, is worrying, but when it is academic and interacts with the condition of confinement, it has a greater impact on university students; specifically, on university students in Peru (Estrada, 2021), 85% of students report academic stress of moderate to severe. In this study, most of the participants have negative feelings, which can affect their physical and psychological health, and this has been a constant among university students (Fernández, 2021).

During the pandemic, physical, psychological, and academic health are at stake, which in interaction can enhance their alterations, so timely interventions are required. Being the university students themselves who indicate that a course in these times of confinement would be a good opportunity to learn coping strategies in the face of this health condition. In a recent systematic review on coping strategies in university students, the need to implement timely interventions was highlighted so that this population faces the daily challenges of the new normality during the pandemic (García & Ramos, 2022). It has been shown that brief psychological interventions have a positive effect on more than 40% of university students (Bautista-Díaz et al., 2021), therefore, it is important that health psychologists do not give up on continuing to design interventions based on in the detection of specific needs to contribute to the comprehensive health not only of university students but also of other populations.

## CONCLUSION

University students have varied psycho-social needs derived from confinement and change in the educational modality (from face-to-face to online). Prominent academic stress, negative feelings, decreased social relationships, family problems, inability to organize and insomnia, but all these alterations can be addressed through group interventions (as a workshop) from health psychology, which considers psychoeducation and training in relaxation, breathing and problem-solving techniques, since these have been shown to be effective in mood disorders in general, and academics.

The COVID-19 pandemic forces health professionals, more specifically health psychologists, to contribute to health promotion and disease prevention by designing interventions based on the specific needs of culture and population.

The authors recognize as limitations of the present study, the size of the sample, type of sampling, use of the script, for which it is suggested that future research increase the size of the sample and use standardized instruments to characterize in terms of measures of central tendency and other trend patterns in the response of the participants.

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