Mental health of university faculty: a systematic literature review

Saúde mental de docentes universitários: uma revisão sistemática da literatura

Salud mental de profesores universitarios: una revisión sistemática de la literatura

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Highlights

Among civil servants, teachers are the ones who leave their jobs the most.

The mental illness of teachers is seen as a public health problem.

Teachers remain in a constant state of alert in their work activities.

Abstract

This study investigated the mental health indicators of higher education teachers and evaluated their sociodemographic characteristics through a systematic literature review. This review was inspired by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) Statement recommendations. Ten articles were selected. It was found that individuals of the female gender exhibited higher levels of depressive symptomatology compared to those of the male gender. It was observed that indicators of depressive symptomatology, stress, and anxiety are elevated in the population. Finally, in most of the studies, high rates of mental illness were found.

Resumo | Resumen

Keywords

Mental health. Teachers. Symptoms.

| Introduction

The educational process represents an interaction between individuals who explore an objective reality that can be understood. As we explore the world and its objective aspects, we develop critical capacity, generating new answers, questions, and reflexive actions. According to Paulo Freire, teachers play the role of facilitators of critical education, encouraging students to think independently and reflect rationally on their realities (Freire, 2015).

An analysis of the human experience inevitably addresses its plural nature, considering the human being as an existential being shaped by a series of contingencies, opportunities, and self-constructions (Oliveira et al., 2022). The understanding of the world as a common space permeates the entire course of the educational process, in which the teacher occupies a role of great responsibility, as they assume a central position, because they provide a link between the novelty of the world that already exists and those who are unfamiliar with it and who are inserted into it (Nascimento, 2020). Therefore, the individual acts in an unprecedented way in an unknown world, and the beginning of this process is their birth, a moment of expression of the capacity for beginnings inherent to humans: from the field of their actions, people experience the new in a common and shared world (Fernandes, 2021).

The educational process, intrinsically linked to human interactions, reflects the Arendtian view that to live is to be among men, sharing a common world (Pequeno, 2021). Thus, learning does not take place in isolation, but through the sharing of experiences in a collective context, in which new individual actions contribute to public life (Dias, 2021). In this context, the role of the teacher is fundamental, as they are constantly immersed in interactions with their students, requiring a high level of cognitive and emotional involvement (Campos & Viegas, 2021). This constant demand for interaction and immediate response can contribute to the development of psychopathological symptoms, especially given the complexity and intensity of the educational environment (Avilés et al., 2020).

From this perspective, psychopathological symptoms are widely recognized as global public health problems, and early detection of these symptoms can be very useful for carrying out psychological interventions in the educational environment (Coker et al., 2018). School, as a dynamic environment with constant social interactions, is a favorable setting for manifesting psychological distress (Wagner et al., 2021). This can be understood as a state that involves the subject's constant struggle against what causes their mental suffering, resulting in the absence of emotional balance and stability that used to be common (Oliveira & Santos, 2021).

The constant stress of the teaching routine has a significant impact on teachers' mental health. The most common symptoms include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low professional achievement (Campos et al., 2020). In this context, the early identification of psychopathological symptoms becomes crucial

not only for specific interventions but also to mitigate the adverse effects of the emotional burden and stress inherent in the educational environment.

This research aims to investigate the mental health indicators of higher education teachers and assess their sociodemographic characteristics. The study aims to examine the mental health of higher education teachers. Based on scientific literature, this area has received increasing attention due to the challenges and demands faced by professionals. By investigating mental health indicators, we can better understand the educational environment's impact on these professionals' health.

Method

The research was inspired by the recommendations of the PRISMA Statement*(Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*), which guides the construction of systematic literature reviews, indicating a list of items that must be present (Galvão & Ricarte, 2019). The database search process used the following descriptors: "*University Professor*" *OR* "*Faculty*" *AND* "*Mental Health*" to select articles, so that they could be present in any part of the text. No systematic reviews with this objective were found on the Cochrane Platform using these descriptors.

The central research question was: what are the indicators of mental health among higher education professors and their sociodemographic characteristics? From there, the searches were carried out as follows: firstly, searches were carried out using keywords found in the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS): "*University Professor*" *OR* "*Faculty*" *AND* "*Mental Health*". We opted to use alternative terms indicated in the DeCS to provide a wider range of results. The eligibility criteria were: Text written in Portuguese, English, German or Spanish; Empirical studies dealing with mental health and teaching; Studies carried out with higher education professors. The exclusion criteria were: news on the subject, texts not peer-reviewed, and texts published more than five years ago.

To ensure that the review incorporated the most recent and relevant information, it was decided to exclude texts published more than five years ago. This time frame was chosen in order to ensure that the results of the survey reflected the closest state of current knowledge on mental health among higher education professors, thus providing a more up-to-date and pertinent analysis

The databases used as sources of information were the *PsycInfo, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science* platforms. The researchers searched for studies using the following descriptors: *"University Professor" OR "Faculty" AND "Mental Health".* Selected studies are presented employing a flowchart showing the results of individual studies and their syntheses.

The selection in the databases was exclusive to the "title" field to provide greater relevance and precision in the search results. This methodological approach ensured that the studies selected were related to the central research topic, so

priority was given to studies that had an objective connection with the research focus. This delimitation, restricting the descriptors to the title, helped to select results that were more consistent and coherent with the scope of the proposed investigation.

During the data collection process, each researcher independently analyzed the relevant articles and issued an opinion on whether or not to include them in the review. In cases of disagreement, a third researcher was contacted. After selecting the studies to be used in the review, the data was tabulated. The data was collected in January 2023. Three judges were used in the process of including and excluding the articles.

Figure 1, Identification of studies from the database, below, shows a flowchart presenting the results and the article selection process. It contains information on the identification, screening, and inclusion process.

Figure 1
Identification of studies
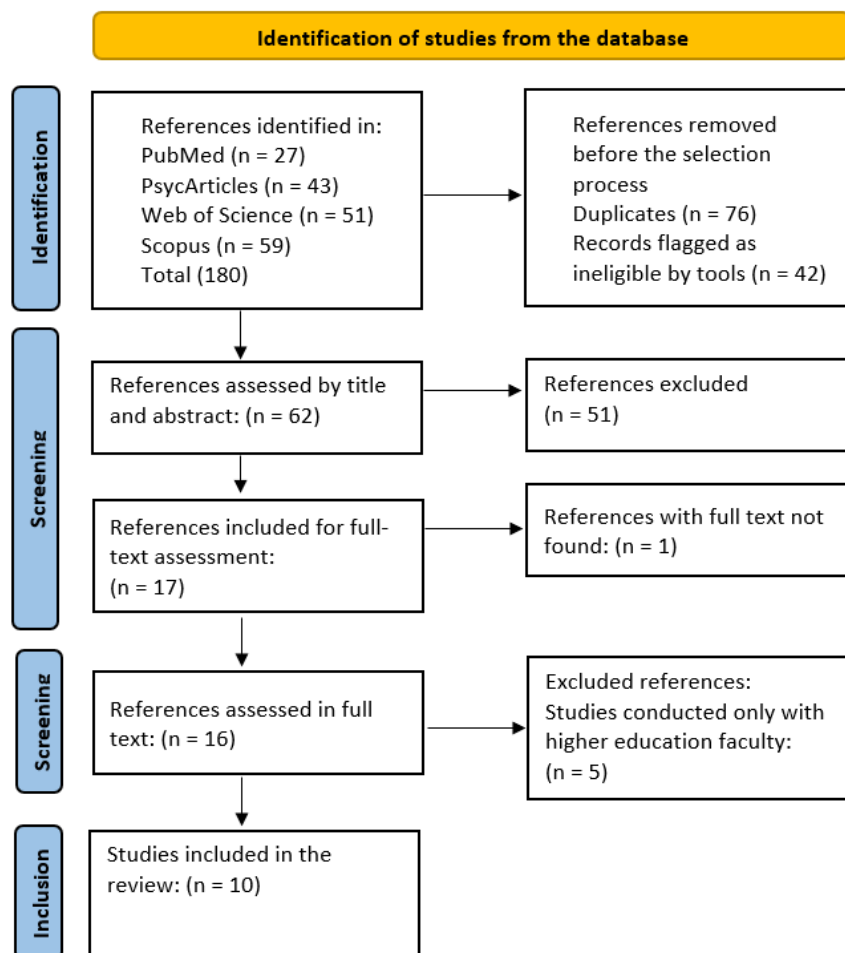
Source: Identification of studies from the database (Page et al., 2021).

Results

To highlight the information found in the studies mentioned in the systematic review, Table 1, article information, presents a summary of the authors of the study, as well as the year of publication, the number of participants, their average age and gender, and, finally, the objectives and results achieved in each one. When searching for articles in these databases, 180 studies were found, distributed as follows: 27 in *PubMed*, 43 in *PsycArticles*, 51 in *Web of Science* , and 59 in *Scopus*. Despite the considerable number of articles found (n= 180), several were excluded. Of these, 76 were duplicates and 42 were classified as ineligible by search engines (peer-reviewed studies).

Table 1
Article information

Author and year of publication	Sample (n) Gender	Average age	Instrument used	Objective of the study	Results achieved
Nascimento et al. (2021)	(n) 563 Men (322) Women (241)	44.1	*Teacher Stress Inventory* (TSI)	To analyze the coping strategies of Accounting professors and their impact on perceived stress.	The average stress reported was 63% of the maximum TSI score.
Smith et al. (2022)	(n) 9 Male 6 Female 3	Data not provided	Semi-structured interviews	Describe how environmental factors, social interactions, personal experiences, and stigma affect mental health and help-seeking.	Competitiveness and individualism can reinforce the idea that mental illness is an intrinsic weakness and that seeking help is an obstacle to academic success.

Saw et al. (2023)	(n) 779 Men 453 Women 307 Other gender identities 19	48.43	Self-reported scales: technological challenges in the transition to remote teaching and (2) challenges in adapting course design to remote teaching.	To examine gender differences in readiness for remote teaching and mental health problems among university professors.	Women have shown higher levels of anxiety and depression during the *Coronavirus Disease* 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic.
Ramesh et al. (2022)	(n) 165 Men 86 Women 79	34.5	Questionnaire prepared by the authors	To assess awareness, attitude, anxiety, and perceived mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic among dentistry professors, students, and their parents in South India.	Professors, compared to parents, were 32.1% more worried about eliminating thoughts, more anxious and concerned about their family's health and safety (49%) and financial situation (54.6%).
Kita et al. (2022)	(n) 537 Gender not informed	Data not provided	*World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index* (WHO-5)	Examining mental health among Japanese teachers who taught online courses during the Covid-19 pandemic.	33.5% of faculty members have been recognized as being at risk of mental illness during the Covid-19 pandemic.
Victor et al. (2022)	(n) 452 Gender not reported	35.1	Questionnaire prepared by the authors	To characterize the prevalence and characteristics of undiagnosed mental health difficulties and mental disorders among psychology professors and interns.	Diagnosed mental disorders (40.49%) without mental health difficulties among the faculty staff (29.20%).
Zarezadeh	(n) 157	Not	General Health	To investigate	31% of the

et al. (2020)	Men 95 Women 62	informed	Questionnaire – 28	the mental health of faculty members and students at the Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences.	professors had symptoms of a mental disorder.
Lal et al. (2020)	(n) 345 Men 211 Women 134	41.9	*General Health Questionnaire-12*(GHQ 12). *Maslach burnout inventory (MBI). Empathy: The Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy* (JSPE).	To assess the prevalence of *burnout* and mental distress.	Overall stress levels were reported as 'extreme' by 23%; even so, 98% reported that they found the work satisfying."
Melnyk et al. (2021)	n (869) Men 645 Women 215 Not informed 9	50.6	The Patient Health Questionnaire 2 (PHQ-2) socio-demographic *questionnaire. The Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2 scale* (GAD-2). *The Perceived Stress Scale 4* (PSS-4).	To describe the rates of mental health problems and healthy lifestyle behaviors among teachers and to identify predictive factors for depression, stress, and anxiety.	5.5% to 9.9% were screened positive for depression, and 11.5% to 25.5% had anxiety. Age, sleep, and physical activity were associated with lower depression and anxiety.
Docka-Filipek & Stone (2021)	n (342) Men (71) Women (266) Transgender, *genderqueer*, non-binary (5)	42.84	*Depression scale* (CES-D). *State Trait Anxiety Inventory*.	To examine the effects of work-related factors on the mental health of teaching staff during the initial "lockdown" of spring 2020 and the transition to remote working (Covid-19).	Male faculty members reported marginally greater financial concerns than female faculty members. Female professors reported significantly higher depressive symptoms.

Source: Docka-Filipek & Stone (2021), Kita et al. (2022), Lal et al. (2020), Melnyk et al. (2021), Nascimento et al. (2021), Ramesh et al. (2022), Saw et al. (2023), Smith et al. (2022), Victor et al. (2022), and Zarezadeh et al. (2020).

A total of 62 articles were included for review, in such a way that after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 10 studies were selected. The included studies totaled 4221 participants, with a mean age of 42-47 in the studies that presented it, given that 3 of them did not present this data: Kita et al. (2022), Smith et al. (2022) and Zarezadeh et al. (2020) – which ranged from 34.1 to 50.6 years.

Regarding gender, it is important to note that the studies by Kita et al. (2022) and Victor et al. (2022) did not present the respective genders of the specific teacher population. According to the others, the female gender represented approximately 40.48% of the samples; the male gender represented the majority with 58.50%, while other gender identities represented 1.02%.

In turn, the instruments adopted were varied and investigated different mental health-related variables. The study by Docka-Filipek & Stone (2021) investigated depressive and anxiety symptoms using the *Depression scale* (CES-D) and a *State Trait Anxiety Invent*ory, respectively. The research by Melnyk et al. (2021) sought to address the predictive factors of depression, stress and anxiety using mental health scales *(The Patient Health Questionnaire 2* – PHQ-2 -, *The Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2 Scale* – GAD-2 – and *The Perceived Stress Scale* 4 – PSS-4).

The study by Lal et al. (2020) used the *General Health Questionnaire-12* (GHQ 12), *Maslach burnout Inventory* (MBI) and *The Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy* (JSPE). The study by Zarezadeh et al. (2020) used a General Health Questionnaire – 28, while the studies by Victor et al. (2022) and Ramesh et al. (2022) used questionnaires developed by the authors. Kita et al. (2022) used the *World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index* (WHO-5).

Saw et al. (2023) used two scales mentioned by the author: the first of technological challenges in transitioning to remote learning and the second of challenges in adapting course design to remote learning. The research by Smith et al. (2022) is qualitative and used semi-structured interviews. Nascimento et al. (2021) used the *Teacher Stress Inventory* (TSI) scale.

The variables depressive symptomatology and anxiety were investigated in the research by Saw et al. (2023) and Melnyk et al. (2021), who also investigated the variable stress. The first survey found that female professors had higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms during the Covid-19 pandemic. The second found that of the sample of 869 professors who responded to the survey, 45 (5.5%) had depressive symptoms, n = 100 (11.5%) had increased anxiety symptoms (GAD-2 ≥ 3), and n = 203 (23.4%) had moderate to high levels of stress (PSS-4 ≥ 8).

The study by Nascimento et al. (2021) found that the average stress reported by teachers was 63% of the maximum TSI score. The study by Lal et al. (2020) found that 82 out of 345 interviewees (23%) reported overall stress levels as 'extreme'. In

turn, the study by Ramesh et al. (2022) pointed out that during the pandemic, teachers, compared to parents, were 32.1% more worried about eliminating thoughts, more anxious and worried about their family's health and safety (49%) and financial situation (54.6%).

The research by Kita et al. (2022), Victor et al. (2022), and Zarezadeh et al. (2020) addressed mental health issues. In the study by Zarezadeh et al. (2020), it was indicated that 31% of the professors investigated had symptoms of mental disorder, while the study by Kita et al. (2022) found that 5% of the professors in question were recognized as being at risk of mental illness during the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey by Victor et al. (2022) indicated that 40.49% had diagnosed mental disorders.

A qualitative study by Smith et al. (2022) pointed out that the competitiveness and individualism present in the field of higher education can perpetuate stereotypes that mental illness is synonymous with inherent weakness and that seeking help is considered a barrier to academic success. Finally, the study by Docka-Filipek & Stone (2021) indicated that male faculty members reported higher financial concerns than female faculty members. Female professors reported significantly higher depressive symptoms than male professors.

Discussion

This study sought to investigate the mental health indicators of higher education professors. One of the main findings is the indicators of depressive symptoms, high stress, and anxiety, which are widely recognized as global public health problems, and early detection of these symptoms can be very useful for psychological interventions in the educational environment (Coker et al., 2018). The university is a dynamic environment in which social interactions are constant. The literature highlights that the emotional distress of professors is high (Wagner et al., 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) conceptualizes mental health as a state of well-being characterized by awareness of one's own capabilities and the ability to cope productively with life's stresses while contributing to the community. This balance of psychic functions allows for appropriate interactions and communications, enabling the individual to face challenges. However, socioeconomic, environmental, and behavioral factors can influence mental health and can lead to the development of mental disorders when there is an imbalance in these functions (WHO, 2019).

In the educational context, teachers face a significant increase in episodes of depression and anxiety disorders, influenced by various factors such as ambiguity in their roles, time pressures, and work overload. These factors contribute to the development of psychological stress and physical and mental exhaustion, which negatively impact teachers' health (Wagner et al., 2021).

The mental illness of professors is seen as a public health problem, given that significant rates of psychological distress are verified in research involving this

professional category, so that mental and behavioral disorders are the main health complaints among teachers (Campos et al., 2020). The teaching profession is classified as one of the most stressful, and teachers are one of the public servants who leave the job the most (Ramos et al., 2020).

Two studies indicated that females had higher rates of depressive symptoms (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021; Saw et al., 2023). According to the study by Saw et al. (2023), the Covid-19 pandemic may have accentuated the gender disparities that already existed in the academic environment in the most diverse fields of knowledge, given that female teaching professionals may tend to have more teaching tasks and be responsible for taking care of children and household chores compared to males.

The study by Lal et al. (2020) assessed the prevalence of *burnout* among professors.
In 2019, the WHO included burnout syndrome in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), defining it as an occupational phenomenon characterized by exhaustion, decreased professional achievement, and depersonalization (Areosa & Queirós, 2020). The term "burnout" was introduced by Herbert Freudenberger, an American psychoanalyst, in the 1970s, initially to describe mental and physical exhaustion among health professionals who dealt with drug users (Vieira & Russo, 2019).

Currently, burnout syndrome is seen in many professional areas. It is understood as a state of exhaustion related to work and can appear in any occupational environment. In this context, there is a significant loss of working capacity, with the worker perceiving that their activity depletes their energy, resulting in a continuous feeling of exhaustion (Vazquez et al., 2019).

Depersonalization, a defining characteristic of burnout, is also referred to in the literature as cynicism, highlighting the interpersonal dimension of the syndrome and referring to often insensitive or impersonal responses. This can include distancing oneself from coworkers, clients, or the institution in which one works (Costa et al., 2020).

Burnout syndrome involves a prolonged response to work-related stress. Strategies for dealing with this syndrome include changes to the work environment, improving working conditions, reorganizing workloads, and addressing individual aspects such as self-knowledge and interpersonal relationships (Alencar et al., 2022).

From the same perspective of overwork, the literature points out that professors are involved in a series of extra-class activities, such as developing activities with the academic community, meetings and interactions between colleagues, management/coordination with students, planning and correcting activities, assignments, and exams, and carrying out reports, among others (Moura et al., 2019). Among the factors contributing to the rise in rates of mental illness among teachers are the constant state of alertness, excessive activity, competitiveness,

loss of autonomy, physical and mental exhaustion, and implicit and explicit demands, as well as low salaries (Wagner et al., 2021).

In the educational context, teachers' mental health emerges as a critical aspect to consider. Tostes et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of socio-emotional skills. Socio-emotional skills are the set of tools that enable people to identify, understand, regulate, and transform their own emotions and those of others, demonstrate empathy, establish and develop positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and set and achieve personal goals (Cuevas et al., 2023; Goleman, 1995).

In light of the conceptions of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2015) and authors such as Gardner (2016) and Goleman (1995), socio-emotional skills emerge as fundamental for personal, academic, and professional success. These skills not only influence individual performance but also promote a healthy and collaborative work environment (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Therefore, investing in developing these skills is essential to meet the challenges of the contemporary educational environment.

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to support teachers' mental health. Studies such as that by Ferreira et al. (2021) show a significant increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress among teachers during the pandemic. This further highlights the importance of socio-emotional skills in promoting resilience and psychological well-being, both for teachers and their students (Cuevas et al., 2023).

Given this scenario, strengthening teachers' socio-emotional skills becomes a priority not only to promote their well-being but also to create positive and inclusive learning environments (West, 2016). Investing in effective communication, constructive conflict resolution, and developing healthy relationships is key to meeting the challenges of teaching and ensuring an environment conducive to students' growth and development (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Heckman & Kautz, 2012).

Intervention programs aimed at coping with stress and preventing *burnout* often include specific emotional regulation strategies, as Guerra et al. (2021) suggested. These interventions aim to help teachers cope more effectively with the job demands and maintain a healthy emotional balance. Recognizing the dual nature of the emotional experiences associated with teaching, which can range from satisfaction to feelings of helplessness, it becomes clear that socio-emotional skills play a crucial role in coping with these challenges (Cuevas et al., 2023).

Identifying and cultivating higher education professors' socio-emotional skills and mental health is essential to promoting a healthier and more productive educational environment. By recognizing and valuing these skills, educational institutions can help improve teacher well-being, which can, in turn, have a positive impact on students' academic performance and the quality of teaching as a whole. Therefore, it is crucial to invest in effective assessment tools and professional development programs in higher education (Macías et al., 2021).

A recent study focusing on university professors' mental health and socio-emotional skills developed the Inventory of Socio-emotional Skills and Mental Health for Professors (IHSM-P). This tool was designed to comprehensively assess the mental health status and socio-emotional skills of these professionals. The results, obtained through an exploratory factor analysis with a representative sample of 282 teachers, showed a high level of reliability. Thus, the IHSM-P is seen as a reliable and effective psychometric tool for assessing and promoting the well-being of university teachers (Macías et al., 2023).

In this way, it is of great importance that the eyes of science turn to teaching, contributing to the construction of knowledge so that, with the research results, interventions can be carried out that can improve the current situation (Coelho et al., 2021). It is therefore essential that professors know how to deal effectively with the challenges that arise in their daily lives so that they can carry out their work effectively and create spaces conducive to well-being and mental health (Gray et al., 2017).

Teaching has been a source of suffering and often mental illness. The data on the existence of psychopathological symptoms in teachers is significant. The noble activity of teaching, which in Socratic terms makes teaching seen as an activity that stimulates critical thinking, which leads people to think for themselves (Freire, 2015), is plagued by psychological suffering (Tostes et al., 2018). It is therefore of great importance that science's eyes turn to this activity to contribute to the construction of knowledge. With the research results, interventions can be carried out to improve the current situation (Coelho et al., 2021).

It is important to highlight that this systematic review used studies carried out in different countries, so the existence of different contexts should be considered. It is important to note that the rates of mental illness among professors are considerable in a wide variety of contexts.

Conclusion

This systematic review analyzed a total of 62 articles, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in the selection of 10 studies, involving 4,221 participants, with an average age of 42-47 years. The analysis revealed that the teachers' concerns were mainly related to eliminating thoughts, anxiety, family security, and financial situation.

The survey highlighted that, in general, the male gender represented the majority of the samples (58.50%), while the female gender corresponded to 40.48%, and other gender identities to 1.02%. The variability of the instruments used reflected the diversity of the mental health issues addressed.

Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress have been identified in various studies, indicating significant concerns among professors. In addition, the study highlighted the presence of negative stereotypes in relation to seeking help for

mental health issues, perpetuated by competitiveness and individualism in the academic environment.

It is important to observe that gender disparities have also emerged, with women showing higher levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety, which may be exacerbated by the additional pressures during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The results reinforce the need for more effective approaches to promoting professors' mental health in higher education. The academic environment is characterized by constant challenges and high demands, contributing to professors' emotional distress. Therefore, interventions aimed at reducing stress, promoting well-being, and challenging harmful stereotypes are fundamental to improving professors' quality of life and mental health.

It is recognized that the rates of mental illness among professors are significant in various contexts, highlighting the relevance of future research and specific interventions for this population. The authors of this study stress that there are no conflicts of interest in the construction of this research, since they advocate the production of research that contributes to the construction of a healthier teaching environment.

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Contribution to the drafting of the text: Author 1 – Author of the sections Introduction, Methodological path, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion, Search for articles for the systematic review. Author 2 – Data analysis, Search for articles for the systematic review, Review of the results section. Author 3 – Review and consolidation of the manuscript, Data analysis.

Resumo

Este estudo investigou os indicadores de saúde mental de docentes do ensino superior e avaliou suas características sociodemográficas por meio de uma revisão sistemática da literatura. Esta revisão foi inspirada nas recomendações da Declaração PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*). Foram selecionados 10 artigos. Verificou-se que pessoas do gênero feminino apresentaram maiores níveis de sintomatologia depressiva em comparação com as do gênero masculino. Observou-se que os indicadores de sintomatologia depressiva, estresse e ansiedade se encontram elevados na população. Por fim, na maioria dos estudos foram encontrados elevados índices de adoecimento mental.

Palavras-chave: Saúde mental. Docentes. Sintomas.

Resumen

Este estudio investigó los indicadores de salud mental de profesores de educación superior y evaluó sus características sociodemográficas a través de una revisión sistemática de la literatura. Esta revisión se inspiró en las recomendaciones de la Declaración PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*). Se seleccionaron 10 artículos. Se encontró que las personas de género femenino presentaron niveles más altos de sintomatología depresiva en comparación con las del género masculino. Se observó que los indicadores de sintomatología depresiva, estrés y ansiedad están elevados en la población. Finalmente, se encontraron en la mayoría de los estudios altas tasas de enfermedad mental.

Palabras clave: Salud mental. Profesores. Síntomas.