










University extension and prevention of anxiety and depression in high school: an experience report



Extensão universitária e prevenção de ansiedade e depressão no ensino médio: um relato de experiência

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Abstract

Anxiety and depression are psychological disorders that influence the well-being of adolescents with mood changes and specific symptoms. University extension programs contribute to mental health promotion and prevention, providing opportunities for dialogue and support. This experience report describes an extension project focused on mental health care in high school, conducted by medical students at a public school in Minas Gerais (Brazil), with 120 students. The project allowed a better understanding of the context of adolescents and identified suggestive cases of mental disorders. Thus, the initiative had a positive effect on promoting emotional well-being and creating a more supportive school environment.

Keywords: Community-institutional relations; Disease prevention; Mental disorders; Adolescent health; Mental health

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Resumo

Ansiedade e depressão são transtornos psicológicos que afetam o bem-estar dos jovens e que cursam com alterações de humor e sintomas específicos. A extensão universitária pode atuar na promoção e na prevenção da saúde mental ao oferecer dinâmicas de diálogo e acolhimento. Este relato de experiência descreve a experiência de um projeto extensionista sobre cuidados com a saúde mental no ensino médio, conduzido por discentes de Medicina em uma escola estadual de Minas Gerais, com 120 alunos participantes. A ação permitiu compreender o contexto em que os jovens estão inseridos e identificou casos sugestivos de transtornos mentais, demonstrando o impacto positivo do projeto na promoção de bem-estar emocional e na construção de um ambiente escolar mais acolhedor.

Palavras-chave: Relações comunidade-instituição; Prevenção de doenças; Transtornos mentais; Saúde do adolescente; Saúde mental

INTRODUCTION

University extension enables a transformative relationship between the university and society by integrating teaching and research, thereby contributing to the development of educational, cultural, and scientific processes¹. Thus, extension activities aim to fulfill the social commitment of the university, by providing knowledge and benefits to society and students². In this context, the health-society relationship is strengthened to mitigate health inequalities¹.

Extension projects are a vital tool for discussing societal barriers, particularly those people neglected, such as mental health. Anxiety and depression are prevalent disorders among adolescents, leading to emotional disability during adolescence³. Furthermore, addressing these illnesses in the school context is important since they are risk factors for worsening anxiety and depression among adolescents⁴.

Adolescence is a phase of independence quest and individual formation, a period of changes in social, emotional, and biological aspects⁵. Globally, 14% of individuals aged between 10 and 19 experience mental health problems related to depression and anxiety disorders⁶, which influence psychological and biological well-being, such as mood, attention, and concentration⁷.

Different perspectives and uncertainties about the future characterize the adolescent period. Mental illness and alterations in development are highly possible in these individuals, along with changes in behavior and social relationships⁸. Moreover, autonomy, self-esteem, family support, optimism, and creativity are allies in the psychological well-being of this population, allowing a better quality of life and positive feelings⁹.

University extension is an effective strategy for the prevention and care of mental disorders. School-based programs on the promotion of mental health play a vital role by addressing mental health education, developing coping skills, and providing social support to create a school

environment that promotes the emotional well-being of students¹⁰. In addition, integration of those practices within the school setting extends its role as an agent in promoting mental well-being among adolescents¹¹.

These programs should integrate relaxation and leisure practices, such as breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, and artistic expressions (e.g., music and theater), which reduce stress and anxiety in adolescents, promote a more positive attitude toward life challenges, and provide expression of positive and negative emotions^{12,13}. The partnership with schools enables the creation of a comprehensive, inclusive, and safe support environment for adolescents, making them feel understood and valued¹⁴. This report describes the experience of an extensionist strategy for the prevention and care of mental health in high school, developed and implemented by medical students at a public school.

METHODS

This experience report describes an extension project focused on the mental health of adolescents, conducted with high school students at a local school in Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The project “Roots of mental health: interventions in the prevention of anxiety and depression in high school” was integrated and conducted during the course Interdisciplinary Practices of Extension, Research, and Teaching V of the Medicine program at the Centro Universitário FIPMoc-Afya. The project aimed to raise awareness and sensitize first-year high school students, aged between 14 and 16 years, on the main psychological disorders during adolescence.

The project was conducted from March to May 2024 with 120 students. The group was selected based on social and psychological vulnerability observed by school professionals and first-year teachers, since most students were black and of low income. This extension project was approved by the research ethics committee of FIPMoc-Afya (No. 5.537.507), ensuring confidentiality and privacy of all participants.

The actions were planned and discussed with school professionals, ensuring alignment with the needs and context of students. This joint planning enabled an integrated and effective approach, promoting a welcoming environment and encouraging active participation of students. Invitations to the activities were disseminated and displayed in the school.

Medical students coordinated the extension interventions conducted at the school and receiving support from the school staff and the Academic Leagues of Psychology and Physiotherapy of the university. The project aimed to guide students on the care of psychological well-being. The activities were performed over three days. On the first day, students were welcomed and introduced to the project, being encouraged to participate in a dynamic to manage emotions using the gratitude and negative feelings boxes. The boxes served as tools for emotional support, allowing students to describe their feelings on paper that was placed inside the boxes (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Opening of the extension project and box dynamics.

Source: archive of authors (Montes Claros, 2024).

On the second day, the medical students and the Psychology League explored the emotions from the negative feelings box (Figure 2) using reflections and constructive discussions. Subsequently, students wrote letters to their future selves, including goals, dreams, and wishes, which were stored by the school and were opened at their high school graduation. This moment was important for the students to reflect on their emotions and their health management.



Figure 2. Activity on negative emotions and the practice of integrative and complementary health practices.

Source: archive of authors (Montes Claros, 2024).

On the third day, the project concluded with a dynamic session involving integrative and complementary health practices, along with relaxation techniques, performed by the Physiotherapy League (Figure 2). After, medical students offered a shared snack and distributed educational booklets containing information on locations with professional help when needed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The experience of medical students with adolescents enabled them to understand the context in which adolescents are inserted, allowing an individualized understanding of the socioemotional challenges. Moreover, this interaction identified suspected cases of anxiety and depression

among students at the school, serving as an alert to the school community.

Furtado *et al.* (2023)¹⁵ emphasized that university extension offers opportunities for health professionals to engage with populations beyond the field of health, and the experience and memories are important for personal and professional development. Promoting mental health involves challenges, and extension actions prove effective in addressing these issues¹⁶, particularly in diverse social contexts¹⁷, ensuring the inclusion of social responsibility into the training of health professionals.

The results of the intervention demonstrate a significant impact on students and society, addressing the importance of mental health and strengthening a more welcoming school environment. Many students reported being more comfortable discussing emotions after the project, indicating that the dialogue and activities supported help-seeking behavior. The engagement in the activities highlighted the transformative role of an extension project in building support networks between the health and school sectors.

The primary objective was to promote an extension project with effective educational health for adolescents, enhancing their knowledge of psychological disorders and mental health during adolescence. Thus, the transformative role of the intervention and its contribution to society play a vital role in health promotion and disease prevention.

CONCLUSION

University extension is raising awareness among vulnerable populations on the importance of care and prevention of mental disorders. The implementation of this project within the school environment promoted knowledge of mental health and created spaces for dialogue, enabling adolescents to feel greater emotional freedom.

The results demonstrated that well-planned and easily replicable interventions generate positive impacts and involve medical students with improved knowledge of psychiatric disorders and greater engagement with the community. This experience solidified the importance of university extension and the relationship among health, university, and community from an ethical and conscious perspective of comprehensive and continuous care for adolescent health.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

WAAM: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, and Writing – review and editing. **VMSR, MFSO, and AAF:** Methodology, Writing – original draft, and Writing – review and editing. **JAM, GCP, and MFRP:** Resources, Visualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, and Writing – review and editing. All authors approved the submitted final version.

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