



Research Paper

Suicidal behaviors, social support and reasons for living among nursing students

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SUMMARY

Background: The transition to higher education involves many changes for students.*Objectives:* The aim of the study was to characterize nursing students' suicidal behaviors, use of medication, social support and reasons for living.*Design:* A quantitative cross-sectional and correlational descriptive study was conducted at a Portuguese nursing college.*Methods:* The Social Support Satisfaction Scale (Pais-Ribeiro, 1999) and the Reasons for Living Inventory (Matias and Santos, 2014) were used.*Results:* Most nursing students are women, with a mean age of 20 years, and most of them have siblings. The majority of them lives outside the city of Coimbra. Approximately 5% of students showed suicidal behaviors, being more frequent among women. Around 20% of the students take medication, with a higher prevalence among women. Fourth-year students had the lowest reasons for living and satisfaction with social support scores. *Conclusions:* Five percent of the students had a history of suicidal behaviors. Nine percent of the students take psychotropic medications. The students who take medication are 2.3578 times more likely to have suicidal behaviors. Fourth-year students had the lowest mental health scores. Third-year students were the most satisfied with social support, whereas fourth-year students were the least satisfied. First-year students had the highest reasons for living scores, whereas fourth-year students had the lowest scores.

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Introduction

According to Oliveira (2006), in 2012, suicide was the second leading cause of death among Portuguese adolescents aged between 15 and 24 years, with a suicide rate of 4.5 in males and 1.4 in females (INE, 2013).

Suicidal behaviors are a public health issue. According to the World Health Organization (2014), at least one million people worldwide die by suicide every year. However, the greatest concern is the recent increase in suicide rates among young people.

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among both boys and girls. Therefore, it is important to identify the warning signs and the causes of suicide and suicide attempts (Peixoto et al., 2006). Important contributors to self-harm and suicide include genetic vulnerability and psychiatric, psychological, familial, social, and cultural factors (Hawton, Saunders and O'Connor, 2012).

When young people experience deep personal pain, feel hopeless and cannot find reasons to live, it is necessary to provide a space for

dialogue and proximity, and be available to listen to them and help them enjoy life again (Oliveira, 2006).

According to Oliveira et al. (2001), young people think a lot about death and suicide, but they usually have no appropriate means available to express their concerns.

Considering that the transition from adolescence to young adult life and the entry into higher education occur simultaneously and are potential sources of stress, it is important to better understand suicidal behaviors at this life stage. Transition to higher education involves multiple changes for students, and its true impact depends on the student's characteristics and social support (Pinheiro and Ferreira, 2005).

Transition is a familiar concept in development, adaptation and stress theories. Chick and Meleis (1986) defined transition as the passage or movement from one state, condition or place to another, encompassing the continuity and discontinuity inherent in the life process of human beings.

The transition to higher education implies and is concomitant with a series of changes in the student's life, whose impact relies on the developmental characteristics of the young person, and the requirements and support of the new contexts involved (Santos and Almeida, 2001).

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The demands and difficulties associated with this transition may lead to increased anxiety, depressive symptoms and substance use/abuse, thus increasing the risk of suicidal behaviors (Almeida and Cruz, 2010).

During their studies, higher education students in the health area experience feelings and situations which cause psychological pain and mental health issues, and may consider suicide as a solution to end their psychological suffering (Pereira, 2013; Gonçalves et al., 2011).

According to Serra (2008), nursing students' process of adaptation to higher education is very specific due to the peculiarities inherent in the socialization process of nursing as a profession and may be at higher risk for suicide than other college students (Goetz, 1998).

Health care professionals, particularly nurses, have to deal with strong and contradictory feelings and their mental health status has been an object of study due to occupational stress, the ambiguity of the profession, and the importance of their bio-psychological integrity in the face of human suffering. During their studies, nursing students begin to experience these feelings and ambiguities.

Another important issue is the change of residence, being the social, physical and psychological isolation a risk factor (Botega et al., 2005). Thus, the higher the students' perception of the social support available (the unconditional acceptance of parents, friends and relatives or their social network), the more positive and satisfactory will be their academic experiences and the better will be their adaptation to the program, the institution, the relationships with peers and teachers, and the perception of their own physical and psychological well-being (Pinheiro and Ferreira, 2005).

Considering that the literature on suicidal ideation among Portuguese nursing students is scarce and the increase of suicidal behaviors among nursing students, we believed that it was important to conduct a study in this area.

Therefore, the purpose of this study on suicidal ideation and social support among undergraduate nursing students in Coimbra was to characterize nursing students regarding their self-harm behaviors, social support, and use of medication, as well as make recommendations for the prevention of suicidal behaviors.

Research Questions

In view of the abovementioned objectives and based on the existing evidence, the following research questions were formulated:

- How are nursing students characterized regarding their suicidal behaviors;
- How are nursing students characterized regarding their reasons for living;
- How are nursing students characterized regarding their perception of social support;
- How are nursing students characterized regarding their use of medication?

Methodology

The population in this study was composed of the undergraduate nursing students of the Nursing School of Coimbra, Portugal.

The study included all students enrolled in the undergraduate program who accepted to participate in the study. Students participating in exchange programs (Erasmus or others) and students from other countries were excluded from the study.

Data were collected between September 24, 2012, and March 29, 2013, in a population of 1500 students. A total of 1130 students agreed to participate, accounting for 75.33% of the total population.

We used descriptive and inferential statistics and a binary logistic regression analysis was performed to predict suicidal behaviors.

A questionnaire was designed to obtain data on the socio-demographic characteristics of nursing students, as well as their

satisfaction with social support and reasons for living. The questionnaire was divided into two parts.

Students' Characteristics

The first part aimed to obtain information on the nursing students' gender, age, household, year of study, residence prior to starting the program, contact with family members throughout the program, suicidal behaviors, and use and type of medication.

Scales

The Social Support Satisfaction Scale (SSSS) (Pais-Ribeiro, 1999) is a 15-item questionnaire designed to measure satisfaction with social support, namely with those people with whom they interact, such as family and friends, and the social activities in which they participate. The scale showed good internal consistency. We found the same Cronbach's alpha in this study as the authors of the scale ($\alpha = .85$).

The Portuguese version of the Reasons for Living Inventory (RFLI) (Linehan et al., 1983) was translated and adapted by Matias and Santos (2014). It assesses suicidal ideation and behaviors and consists of 48 items grouped into five categories. The Portuguese version showed good internal consistency. Cronbach's α for the global RFLI was 0.94 (Matias and Santos, 2014). We found a Cronbach's α of 0.91 in this study.

These scales have no mean point. In both scales, higher scores mean better results.

The present study followed all ethical and legal procedures for scientific research. Students gave voluntary informed consent to participate. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

The Board of the Nursing School of Coimbra granted permission for the undergraduate students to complete the questionnaire.

Permission to use the scales was also obtained from the authors.

Results

Students' Characteristics

Of the 1130 nursing students in the sample, most of them (83.19%) were women, with a mean age of 20 years. No difference was found in the mean age between male and female students.

As for the distribution of students by year of study, 28.67% of them were in the 1st year, 27.52% were in the 4th year, 24.51% were in the 2nd year, and 19.29% were in the 3rd year.

As for the city of residence (excluding the period of academic activities), most students (65.13%) lived outside the city of Coimbra. Most households were composed of four or five people (57.43%), followed by households of two to three people (37.08%).

Suicidal Behaviors

As for suicidal behaviors, 5.22% had already had this type of behavior which was more common among women (5.43%) than men (4.21%). No difference was found between years of study.

Use of Medication

The use of medication, which was common in 19.47% of the students in this sample, was also more prevalent among women (88.63%). This may be partially explained by the use of contraceptives. Anxiolytics (4.16%) were the most commonly used drugs, followed by antidepressants (2.57%) and analgesics (2.04%).

Overall, students taking medication were less satisfied with social support (Table 1). This was also true for the subscales related to satisfaction with friends, intimacy and social activities, where lower levels of satisfaction were found in students taking medication. The exception

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