

## ANXIETY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE HEALTH OF PRIMARY HEALTH CARE WORKERS

### ANSIEDADE E SEU IMPACTO NA SAÚDE DOS TRABALHADORES DA ATENÇÃO PRIMÁRIA À SAÚDE

### LA ANSIEDAD Y SU IMPACTO EN LA SALUD DE LOS TRABAJADORES DE LA ATENCIÓN PRIMARIA DE SALUD



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#### ABSTRACT

Anxiety, when it exceeds its adaptive nature, constitutes a disorder that significantly compromises daily life, especially among healthcare workers, a group with a high prevalence due to work overload, precarious employment relationships, emotional demands, and insufficient infrastructure. Studies show that these professionals face a high risk of mental illness, with direct impacts on functionality, productivity, and the quality of care provided. The literature highlights that Primary Health Care, although essential for treating and preventing diseases, still suffers from structural and organizational weaknesses that hinder effective actions to promote worker health. Given this, it is essential to strengthen public policies, health surveillance practices, and management models that guarantee decent working conditions, emotional support, burnout prevention, and appropriate therapeutic interventions, ensuring both the well-being of professionals and the quality of care offered to the population.

**Keywords:** Anxiety. Mental Health. Primary Care.

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## RESUMO

A ansiedade, quando ultrapassa seu caráter adaptativo, configura um transtorno que compromete significativamente a vida cotidiana, especialmente entre trabalhadores da saúde, grupo que apresenta alta prevalência devido à sobrecarga laboral, vínculos precários, exigências emocionais e infraestrutura insuficiente. Estudos evidenciam que esses profissionais enfrentam risco elevado de adoecimento mental, com impactos diretos na funcionalidade, produtividade e qualidade da assistência prestada. A literatura destaca que a Atenção Primária à Saúde, embora essencial para acolher e prevenir agravos, ainda sofre fragilidades estruturais e organizacionais que dificultam ações efetivas de promoção da saúde do trabalhador. Diante disso, torna-se imprescindível fortalecer políticas públicas, práticas de vigilância em saúde e modelos de gestão que garantam condições dignas de trabalho, suporte emocional, prevenção do esgotamento e intervenções terapêuticas adequadas, assegurando tanto o bem-estar dos profissionais quanto a qualidade do cuidado oferecido à população.

**Palavras-chave:** Ansiedade. Saúde Mental. Atenção Primária.

## RESUMEN

La ansiedad, cuando supera su carácter adaptativo, constituye un trastorno que compromete significativamente la vida cotidiana, especialmente entre los trabajadores de la salud, un grupo que presenta una alta prevalencia debido a la sobrecarga laboral, los vínculos precarios, las exigencias emocionales y la infraestructura insuficiente. Los estudios evidencian que estos profesionales enfrentan un alto riesgo de enfermedad mental, con impactos directos en la funcionalidad, la productividad y la calidad de la atención prestada. La literatura destaca que la Atención Primaria de Salud, aunque esencial para atender y prevenir enfermedades, aún sufre debilidades estructurales y organizativas que dificultan las acciones efectivas de promoción de la salud del trabajador. Ante esto, es imprescindible fortalecer las políticas públicas, las prácticas de vigilancia de la salud y los modelos de gestión que garanticen condiciones de trabajo dignas, apoyo emocional, prevención del agotamiento e intervenciones terapéuticas adecuadas, asegurando tanto el bienestar de los profesionales como la calidad de la atención ofrecida a la población.

**Palabras clave:** Ansiedad. Salud Mental. Atención Primaria.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Anxiety, in its non-pathological form, called adaptive, is defined as a physiological reaction of the human organism to a stimulus, a warning sign about imminent dangers, which incites to take measures to face them, as an anticipation of threat. It is understood as a normal response of the body, just like fear. (OBELAR, 2016; WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 1993; AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2014).

It is considered an Anxiety Disorder when the intensity and duration of the reaction increases, which becomes present in situations beyond the moment of punctual stress, reaching disproportion in relation to the real risk that is presented. Thus, it leads to a daily disturbance due to the signs and symptoms experienced. (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 1993; BORINE, 2011) Clinically, psychological distress is often described as a sense of oppression and emotional vulnerability. The main characteristics of anxiety disorders are persistent and excessive worry about various domains, including work, educational, personal performance, and may cause observable signs. (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION,

1993; FONSECA, 2023; AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2014).

Anxiety disorders significantly affect the worker's life, impairing professional activities, relationships, and self-care. These disorders have low rates of spontaneous remission and tend to become chronic. When left untreated, or aggravating stimuli are not managed, its symptoms surely persist, leading to considerable impairments in daily functioning, a drop in quality of life, and a major economic impact. (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 1993; RIBEIRO, 2019)

Anxiety disorders are some of the most common mental health conditions. They are described as the second leading cause of sick leave among mental and behavioral disorders. Women have a higher prevalence of anxiety disorders compared to men. (RIBEIRO, 2019; JULIO, 2022; SANTANA, 2016)

Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that Brazil registers the highest number of cases of anxiety in the world. Regarding health professionals, mental health problems are among the most prevalent and a progressive increase in cases has been reported in recent years. Depression and anxiety are more prevalent among Community Health Agents (CHA) and are more frequent among workers aged 21 to 35 years. (SANGALETTI, 2018; BARBOSA, 2021; SOARES, 2021)

The pathological manifestation of anxiety can be stimulated by psychological trauma, physical illness, substance abuse, and genetic factors. It is aggravated by exposure to a continuous stressor component, as occurs in work demands with strict deadlines and goals,

low social support of the affected individual, excessive load of general tasks, insufficient appreciation and also exaggerated individual commitment. (FONSECA, 2023; RIBEIRO, 2019)

As for health professionals, this population is sometimes overloaded and held responsible for the care of other people's lives. They also deal with limitations in the possibilities of intervention and sometimes the importance of friction between colleagues is reported. Examples of causal stressors in health professionals are the high flow of care and long working hours, which can result in an overload of duties. (BARBOSA, 2021; SILVA, 2022)

Disorders, when potentiated by high stress - as in the work dynamics explained - have the potential to boost and enhance behaviors and complications, significantly interfering with the individual's daily functionality and worsening in the future. Therefore, it sometimes needs treatment. (SOARES, 2021; SILVA, 2022)

Given the epidemiological importance of anxiety disorder, its debilitating potential, and knowing its high prevalence among health professionals, the present study aims to identify, in the available literature, the interpretation of the impact of anxiety on the health of primary health care workers and to discuss possible ways to reduce harm and improve mental health.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative and descriptive research, based on a literature review. An electronic search was performed in the following databases: Google Scholar, SciELO, LILACS and Pepsic based on the descriptors: "anxiety", "mental health" and "primary care".

## **3 DISCUSSION**

In the early 2000s, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) predicted an increase in mental health problems and warned about the impacts of this growth on the working population, including decreased productivity, absences from work, reduced functional and work capacity, as well as social exclusion and stigmatization of workers. (RIBEIRO, 2019)

Despite the advances and setbacks in labor laws in Brazil, health surveillance is still a recent practice and is not implemented effectively or integrated into the health sector. Thus, social achievements do not fully ensure what is proposed, and work continues to be one of the factors that have an important influence on the health and disease process. (OBELAR, 2016)

Research and development in contemporary academic and scientific models on workers' health dates back to the 1950s and the theme is important to the health and human

sciences. However, due to conjunctural and predominant factors, the interest in analysis and research in this area has not increased and, for years, they have tended to be scarce. (VASCONCELOS, 2008)

The update of the National Primary Care Policy (PNAB) in 2017 brought significant setbacks to the health system, such as: the reduction of funding for the Family Health Strategy (ESF), the withdrawal of its priority as the care team model in Primary Health Care (PHC) and the formation of incomplete teams, with only one mandatory CHA. These changes weaken the effectiveness of this care model and compromise the resolution capacity of the Unified Health System (SUS). (JULIO, 2022)

The precariousness of working conditions in the health area leads to professionals subject to unstable work relationships, insufficient remuneration, incomplete teams, overload of tasks, in addition to working in environments with deficient infrastructure and scarcity of resources. (JULIO, 2022)

Workers' health is a neglected topic, both by employers who do not prioritize compliance with workers' health principles, and by the professionals themselves, who eventually avoid leaving due to financial issues or social stigma. Overwork often goes unnoticed or ignored by workers themselves, which can eventually result in burnout and unemployment. (RIBEIRO, 2019)

Workers' health is one of the areas with the greatest lag in relation to the implementation of the SUS. Care actions on the subject need to be incorporated not only by PHC teams, but also by surveillance services, ensuring risk prevention and control actions in the workplace, as provided for in various norms and recommendations of the SUS and Workers' Health. They should not be listed exclusively as prerogatives of specialized services. (BORINE, 2011)

The treatment of anxiety has a broad effective approach, which may include psychotherapies, integrative practices, use of medications with scientific evidence and appropriate indication, in addition to approaches to individual daily life. (QUAGLIATO, 2022; SILVA, 2022) However, just as PHC by its essence carries out on a daily basis, prevention is a much less harmful path and can be applied

For PHC to fulfill this role effectively, it is crucial that it is prepared to adequately meet the needs of workers, especially through family health teams that need to get closer to the social demands of the territories in which they operate. It is necessary for the network of municipal health systems to organize itself to develop more effective actions, in order to prevent aggravations and sequelae, in addition to providing more qualified care to those with occupational diseases and accidents. (SANTOS, 2011).

Through Five-Year Prevention, it seeks to safeguard the health of health professionals by preventing phenomena such as exhaustion and, consequently, ensuring the quality and safety of care for individuals with anxiety disorders; (SILVA, 2022) Thus, the solution lies in a greater incentive to understand and extirpate the causes and subjective and systemic conditions of anxiety propensity.

Contributing to knowledge about anxiety disorders, defining responsibilities related to workers' health actions, and describing therapeutic measures are fundamental aspects in the management of anxiety disorders. This is especially relevant in the context of PHC, which concentrates a large part of psychological complaints, often representing the first point of access for patients to the health system. In addition, PHC also presents a risk of psychological distress among its own workers.

The agenda on working conditions consequently deals with the health of the worker and becomes essential to ensure decent work environments and enhance the quality of life of its occupants. (LARA, 2011) To this end, it is urgent to bring health teams, especially family health teams, closer to the social needs established in the territories by the workers (SANTOS, 2011). Health for workers becomes an indispensable element for the maintenance of dignified conditions in work processes and environments and in the enhancement of the life of the subjects (LARA, 2011).

It is important to highlight the need to strengthen the understanding that mental health and work are inseparable aspects in the current productive reality, with the aim of preventing mental illness and absence from work. The National Policy on Workers' Health (PNST) reinforces the importance of primary care as an organizer of the SUS care network, promoting integration with the components of health surveillance and stimulating substantial changes in work processes (BRASIL, 2012).

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

It was observed that valuing and improving working conditions — including the review of schedules and routines — are essential to ensure the well-being of health professionals and the quality of clinical practice. For this, it is essential to adopt management models that offer adequate support to the teams, which involves expanding the number of workers, adjusting schedules, and providing psychological support.

It is also necessary to implement and strengthen actions and policies aimed at workers' health, with emphasis on the detection and monitoring of specific needs, such as cases of anxiety and depression. The maintenance of basic rights — adequate schedules, rest breaks,

regular days off — combined with psychological and psychosocial support and the provision of specialized mental health care, is a central element of this protection.

In addition, the reinforcement of health surveillance actions, especially in the area of occupational health, as well as the allocation of financial, material, and human resources, are essential to ensure adequate working conditions and infrastructure. Professional appreciation, the promotion of a healthy environment and good interpersonal relationships, as well as the encouragement of self-care practices (physical activity, balanced diet, sleep hygiene), contribute significantly to reducing physical and mental exhaustion and, consequently, the risk of illness.

Thus, the present study sought to highlight the importance of research that deepens the understanding of anxiety, with a view to developing effective and lasting interventions that ensure workers' rights. Thus, the need for public policies that promote mental health in the workplace is reinforced, considering both the subjective particularities and the individual needs of each professional.

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