


Stress, depression and anxiety associated with the work of community health workers

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to gather, based on the current literature, factors that contribute to stress, depression and anxiety in community health workers in Brazil. The present paper discusses the importance of Community Health Agents (CHA) in Primary Health Care (PHC) and the challenges faced by these professionals. The lack of recognition, precarious working conditions, excessive bureaucracy and exposure to situations of violence stand out as contributing factors to these problems. The integrative literature review addresses studies that analyze the prevalence and factors associated with these problems among the CHAs, highlighting the physical and emotional overload, the lack of support and professional exhaustion. For the construction of this review, the Grounded Theory methodology was adopted, which allows the approximation and immersion of the data as a starting point for the elucidation of a phenomenon. The predominant methodology in the studies used in this research was cross-sectional data collection, followed by the

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qualitative methodology. It is therefore concluded that it is necessary to adopt health policies aimed at promoting the quality of life of these professionals and improving working conditions in PHC.

Keywords: Community health agents, Depression, Depressive disorder, Anxiety, Stress occupation.



INTRODUCTION

From the implementation of Primary Health Care (PHC) as the main gateway to the services of the Unified Health System (SUS), the importance of the presence of the Family Health Strategy (ESF) in the territory was reaffirmed. Ordinance No. 2.436/2017 provides for the specifications of the Family Health Team (FHT), defining it as a priority health care strategy, reorganizing PHC at the national level (Brasil, 2017). Among the professionals required in this composition, the Community Health Agent (CHA) stands out.

The Community Health Agents Strategy (EACS) is the planning of the reorganization of Primary Care to strengthen the ESF based on the aggregation of CHAs (Brasil, 2017). The work performed by these professionals is difficult to define, since it is characterized as multipurpose (Bezerra and Feitosa, 2018). Among the attributions of the community agent, the processes related to social mobilization, health education, family monitoring, as well as procedures related to the territory, team, and systematization, that is, bureaucratic activities, stand out (Nogueira, 2019; Lima *et al.* 2023).

In this sense, the work of the ACS is essential for the provision of health throughout the territory. Considering their role in the prevention, promotion and protection of health through disease control, this professional must build solid ties with the community (Bezerra and Feitosa, 2018). Thus, the work process involving the ACS requires great psychological capacity, since the occupation requires contact with problems that plague the community, such as those of a social nature and those related to the processes of health and disease (Fernandes *et al.* 2023; Lima *et al.* 2023).

The role of the CHA is characterized as that of a translator of health for the community. Acting as a mediator between the FHT and the population, the professional must present knowledge about sanitary practices and sociocultural characteristics (Fonseca and Morosini, 2021). The actions performed by the ACS are based on knowledge about the reality experienced by the populations, as well as the difficulties faced. This approach to reality gives the agent multiple relationships, such as the mixture of personality and professionalism (Bezerra and Feitosa, 2018).

The literature addresses a series of factors that corroborate the stress and anxiety of PHC professionals, especially the CHA (Julio *et al.* 2022; Magalhães *et al.* 2021). The negative impact on the quality of life of professionals who manage the care provided by primary care directly influences the quality of care provided to communities. Based on this, the objective of this study is to gather, based on the current literature, factors that contribute to stress, depression and anxiety in community health agents in Brazil.



METHODOLOGY

It is an integrative literature review, a method that provides the synthesis of information on a given topic (Souza, Silva and Carvalho, 2010). This study made it possible to gather the main findings of the current literature on the development of stress, depression and anxiety in community health agents, precursor factors of the Professional Exhaustion Syndrome, the Burnout Syndrome (Ferreira *et al.* 2020).

For the construction of this review, the *Grounded Theory* methodology was adopted, which allows the approximation and immersion of the data as a starting point for the elucidation of a phenomenon. The theory makes it possible to identify categories derived from the data by making comparisons. From this perspective, the method adopted allows us to identify the main concerns of the different social actors in solving problems (Morales, 2015).

The search for articles was carried out in the Pubmed, Virtual Health Library (VHL), Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) and Google Scholar databases, based on the descriptors "depression and anxiety in community health agents", "professional exhaustion in community health agents", "Burnout syndrome in community health agents". The period of publications from 2018 onwards was selected. In this way, 7,080 were found.

From the reading of the titles and abstracts, 13 articles were selected that fit the objective of this research, since they deal with problems linked to ACS professionals working in Brazilian PHC. Most of the selected articles were published in 2023 (n=3 or 23%), followed by the years 2022, 2021, 2020 and 2019, with 2 publications each (15.3%), and 2024 and 2018, with 1 publication each (7.6%).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The primary search for the articles allowed the visualization of 7,080 results. At this first moment, there was no application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were based on the objective of this study, to relate the prevalence of depression, anxiety and factors associated with professional burnout in CHAs.

The predominant methodology in the studies used in this research was cross-sectional data collection, followed by the qualitative methodology. Studies were included that analyzed the difficulties encountered in the work of the CHAs, identification of indicators of pleasure and suffering, anxiety and depression among the agents' work, Burnout Syndrome in CHAs, suffering related to daily life and work, among others.

The collection of findings associated with the development of depression and anxiety among health professionals allowed us to summarize the results presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1 – Main factors associated with the development of depression and anxiety in Community Health Agents.

Author/Year	Title	Objective	Finds
Lima <i>et al.</i> 2023	Analysis of indicators of pleasure and suffering at work associated with anxiety and depression among community health workers	To analyze the indicators of pleasure and suffering at work associated with depression and anxiety among community health workers (CHAs).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of depression related to female sex; • 60% of the CHAs have depressive symptoms; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CHAs with an effective employment relationship are more likely to develop depression; • CHAs present critical scores of professional satisfaction, • Lack of recognition and professional burnout; • Concern about the incidence of diseases; • Lack of adequate conditions and infrastructure; • Lack of incentives by management.
Fernandez, Wrestling and Corrêa, 2021	Challenges for Primary Health Care in Brazil: an analysis of the work of community health agents during the Covid-19 pandemic	To analyze the situation of the professionals in question in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil	<p>CHAs point out that after the COVID-19 pandemic they face greater problems related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alteration of the routine at the UBS; • Carrying out bureaucratic work; • Monitoring and implementation of health education.
Menguer <i>et al.</i> 2023	Burnout syndrome and job satisfaction of community health workers	OBJECTIVE: To evaluate the existence of burnout syndrome and job satisfaction of community health agents in a city in the extreme south of Santa Catarina.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indifference to colleagues in eSF; • Dissatisfaction with remuneration; • Dissatisfaction related to the promotion.
Araújo and Greco, 2019	Association between working conditions and the Indicators of Pleasure and Suffering in the daily work of Community Health Agents	To analyze and discuss the working conditions of the Community Health Agent (CHA) of a student in the Zona da Mata region of Minas Gerais and their relationship with the experiences of pleasure and suffering at work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to improve working conditions; • ACS women suffer more for the work performed.



Silva <i>et al.</i> 2019	Community health agents: the burnout syndrome under discussion	Highlight the publications in national and international online journals that address the themes of Burnout Syndrome in Community Health Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low professional recognition; • Work-related bureaucracy; • High work pace; • Exposure to violence; • Physical and psychic overload; • Unpreparedness of managers; • Lack of delineation of functions.
Lopes <i>et al.</i> 2018	Workloads of the community health agent: research and care in the convergent perspective of care	To know the perception of Community Health Agents about the workloads present in their work dynamics and to carry out care practice related to the workloads with the group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical overload; • Physical exposure; • Risk of violence; • Difficulties in the organization of work; • Psychic load; • Frustration due to the lack of resolution.
Suyama <i>et al.</i> 2022	Occupational stress and musculoskeletal symptoms in Community Health Agents	To evaluate the presence of occupational stress and musculoskeletal symptoms in Community Health Agents and to compare occupational stress levels according to sociodemographic characteristics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological demands; • Excessive workloads; • Difficulty in organizing work processes; • Lack of continuing education; • Favoritism in the workplace.
Dias <i>et al.</i> 2020	Investigation of Burnout syndrome in workers of the family health strategy in a municipality in the interior of the state of São Paulo	OBJECTIVE: To investigate the prevalence of Burnout Syndrome among professionals working in the Family Health Strategy (FHS) in the city of Assis, in the interior of the State of São Paulo.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional stress; • Emotional tiredness; • Depersonalization; • BS propensity.
Borges <i>et al.</i> 2023	Between caring and getting sick: the burnout syndrome in community health agents during the covid-19 pandemic	To analyze Burnout Syndrome in Community Health Workers during the COVID-19 pandemic period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical and mental exhaustion; • Extreme tiredness at work; • Depersonalization; • Low professional achievement.
Silva <i>et al.</i> 2024	Mental illness among health professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic	To investigate mental illness among health professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depersonalization; • Depression, anxiety, and stress.

Silva <i>et al.</i> 2020	National Primary Care Policy 2017: implications for the work of Community Health Agents	To investigate the meanings that the CHAs, working in the territories of the North of Minas Gerais, impose on the changes proposed by the PNAB and the possible consequences for their work and for the care of the population.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mischaracterization of the nature of the CHA's educational work; • Lack of professional qualification.
Souza-Julio <i>et al.</i> 2022	Prevalence of anxiety and depression in Primary Health Care workers	To assess the prevalence of anxiety and depression in primary health care workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire to give up the profession; • Anxiety; • Dissatisfaction with the profession; • Depression.
Barbosa <i>et al.</i> 2021	Sociodemographic and occupational factors associated with anxiety symptoms among Community Health Agents	To verify the prevalence of anxiety symptoms and the association with socio-demographic and occupational factors among community health agents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety associated with the female gender; • Accumulation of roles; • Less time available for self-care and leisure.

Source: The author.

The visualization of the findings of the research presented allows us to establish relationships between depression and anxiety and the female gender, listing the double journey faced by women, from motherhood to professionalism, as pointed out by Bianco and Salvaro (2023), however, the study related to gender and Burnout Syndrome carried out by Sarma, Chiu and Kimball (2024) does not point to significant differences between men and women.

Another highlight refers to the mischaracterization of the CHA professional. This factor refers to the lack of understanding about the work processes, since the expansion of the professional scope regarding the practices of the ACS does not allow the delimitation of the role played by the CHA. This factor is shown to limit the work processes performed by the professional, limiting the effective practice in PHC (Silva *et al.* 2020; Silva *et al.* 2019).

Depersonalization, characterized as the distortion of one's view, becomes a problem faced by the CHAs. Characterized as intrinsic to Burnout Syndrome, this depreciative phase generates negative responses of self-perception (Borges *et al.* 2023; Silva *et al.* 2024).

Frequent in this research are the relationships of depression, anxiety and physical and mental fatigue. Such factors are pointed out by Borges *et al.* (2021), in a research related to Burnout Syndrome and health professionals during the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic, indicating symptoms of depression, insomnia, lack of energy, anxiety, irritability, sadness, and insecurity. However, the study



carried out by Silva et al. (2024), point out that the symptoms addressed were already part of the day-to-day life of health professionals in the pre-pandemic period.

Occupational stress has as an aggravating factor the worker's inability to act on stressors, generating exhaustion (Jarruche and Mucci, 2021). In this sense, professionals report exposure to vulnerability factors, such as violence and physical and mental overload (Silva *et al.* 2019; Borges *et al.* 2023). This finding is in line with the study of habits related to the health of CHAs, which reveals that exposure to long distances in adverse climatic and environmental conditions, in addition to contact with risk conditions, is frequent in the work performed by CHAs (Magalhães *et al.* 2021).

CONCLUSION

Since the ACS professional is essential in the provision of health by PHC, it is of paramount importance to recognize the factors that affect the quality of care provided by the class. Thus, this study was able to identify the lack of delimitation regarding the practices performed by the profession, as well as the need for investment in infrastructure to improve the working conditions of these professionals.

Finally, this literature review aims to encourage the formulation of health policies aimed at promoting quality of life in the context of work in primary care, with a view to better health indices, reducing the negative factors that lead to anxiety and depression in the work environment.



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