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Received: June 11, 2023.

Approved on: November 09, 2023.

PEER COUNSELING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF A MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION METHODOLOGY

ABSTRACT

The mental health of university students is the subject of several studies because of the specific stressors that universities impose. The demand for university mental health services is significant, and it is believed that alternative interventions can alleviate student suffering and prevent the onset and/or worsening of mental illness. In this sense, Peer Counseling, a peer-help methodology, is cited as a potential intervention tool. The aim of this research is to identify and describe Peer Counseling models in the international scientific literature. To this end, an integrative review was carried out on the Capes platform. The findings showed that in the experiences described in higher education, all the results were promising when correlated with variables affecting mental health. The strengths of the methodology are the basis of trust based on horizontality, presupposing greater acceptability; the flexibility of the methodology to adapt to various contexts; and its developmental aspect through empowerment. It is concluded that peer counseling is an efficient and promising methodology in mental health, and its discussion is valid with a view to the development and expansion of Brazilian higher education. It is hoped that more research will be done in an exploratory sense to create the necessary bases for this.

Keywords: Mental Health; Higher Education; Peer Counseling; Educational and School Psychology.

PEER COUNSELING NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: REVISÃO INTEGRATIVA DE UMA METODOLOGIA DE INTERVENÇÃO EM SAÚDE MENTAL

RESUMO

A saúde mental do estudante universitário é objeto de várias pesquisas por conta dos estressores específicos que a universidade imprime. A demanda em saúde mental universitária é significativa e acredita-se que intervenções alternativas podem aliviar o sofrimento discente e prevenir o surgimento e/ou agravamento do adoecimento mental. Nesse sentido, cita-se o Peer Counseling, metodologia de entreaajuda de pares, como potencial ferramenta de intervenção. O objetivo desta pesquisa é identificar e descrever os modelos de Aconselhamento entre Pares na literatura científica internacional. Para isso, foi realizada uma revisão integrativa na plataforma Capes. Os achados mostraram que nas experiências descritas no ensino superior, todos os resultados foram promissores quando correlacionados a variáveis que afetam a saúde mental. Os pontos fortes da metodologia são a base de confiança a partir da horizontalidade, pressupondo maior aceitabilidade; a flexibilidade da metodologia para se adequar a vários contextos e o seu aspecto desenvolvimental por meio do empoderamento. Conclui-se que o aconselhamento entre pares é uma metodologia eficiente e promissora em saúde mental, sendo válida a sua discussão visando ao desenvolvimento e expansão no ensino superior brasileiro; espera-se que mais pesquisas sejam feitas em sentido exploratório para criar as bases necessárias para tal.

Palavras-chave: Saúde mental. Educação superior. Aconselhamento entre pares. Psicologia escolar e educacional.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The health-disease process is a concept that refers to all the variables that can affect an individual's health and lead them to develop some kind of maladjustment. Thus, the health-disease dyad considers factors of a biological, economic, and sociocultural nature, and is well summarized as being dialectical and multidimensional (FILHO et al., 1999). Similarly, this complex nature applies to mental health, which is important for "people to realize their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and contribute to their communities" (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 2013, p. 05, our translation). To intervene in this multifaceted dimension, it is necessary to manage comprehensive promotion, prevention, treatment, and recovery strategies (WHO, 2013). Thus, health care must be thought of in an integral way.

1.1 Mental Health in Higher Education

When taken to a specific context - higher education, especially at undergraduate level - mental health may be at greater risk of impairment, considering the contextual specificities of the environment, in addition to its multidimensional nature mentioned above. On the academic environment:

What the literature (national and international) indicates is that the university population is vulnerable to the development of some mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Based on these indicators, the hypothesis is that aspects related to academic life and career can have an impact on the mental health of this population and partially explain the high prevalence of mental disorders in it (ARIÑO; BARDAGI, 2018, p. 44).

Adapting when entering a higher education institution can be a trigger and/or maintainer of high levels of stress because it involves factors such as acquiring new responsibilities, work overload, lack of time, distance from loved ones and friends, competitiveness, concerns about the quality of training, curriculum construction and professional career prospects, among others (MORETTI; HÜBNER, 2017). Depending on the student's resources and environment for managing these stimuli, mental health may be affected over time.

Currently, it is known that the Brazilian higher education scenario is sickened by the high prevalence of mental disorders and indicators of generalized low well-being (LEAL et al., 2019). Remedial measures alone are not enough to alleviate the problem. This assumption is supported by the foundations of critical school psychology when it presents new variables to be

considered when observing the phenomenon of school failure (ALMEIDA et al., 2012; GUZZO et al., 2010; ZUCOLOTO et al., 2019). At the higher education level, in terms of mental health, this means looking at variants such as institution-state relations, institution-community relations, teacher-student relations, institutional practices and culture, etc. (SAWAYA, 2002). Thus, we don't just see a sick student but consider critical readings that place this individual in a psychological, biological, social, economic, cultural, and political context.

Mental health interventions in higher education that advocate greater access to psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, and psychopharmacological treatments are extremely valid; however, the potential of developmental and preventive measures, which fit well into the categories of promotion and prevention described by the WHO (2013), cannot be suppressed (ANDRADA, 2005; MARTINEZ, 2010; OLIVEIRA, 2011; SANTOS et al., 2017). The demand for mental health care is significant, but this does not mean that the entire amount is of a clinical nature; from this point on, alternative (in other words, non-clinical) interventions are welcome to alleviate students' suffering and prevent the onset and/or worsening of any mental illness.

1.2 Alternative Intervention in Mental Health

In this sense, Peer Counseling (D'ANDREA, 1987) is mentioned. The history of this methodology dates to the 1960s, from acts derived from the Community Mental Health Act. With the aim of promoting mental health in small communities, people who were interested in helping to achieve this goal, and who had no previous training/specialization, were trained in basic listening skills to work in the communities. In its most primitive form, peer counseling was carried out in school and university spaces; from the 1970s onwards, it began to occupy even more space when it guided pilot psychosocial assistance projects for university students in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, initially (AGUIAR, 2022).

Peer counseling is therefore a non-clinical intervention based on peers helping each other through communication and the exchange of experiences, in which active, empathetic, and non-judgmental listening is indispensable (D'ANDREA, 1987). The guideline of horizontality between peers is highlighted, i.e. the absence of a hierarchy of position between counselor and advisee. This is beneficial because a student may be more inclined to talk about their problems with a peer. In short, a safe space is created for self-exploration searching for alternatives; it is also a way of "helping the student to help themselves" through empowerment

and the assumption that they can solve their everyday problems if they have access to the conditions necessary to mobilize resources.

In an integrative review of the application of the peer counseling methodology in Brazilian higher education, Aguiar (2022) found:

A diversity of applications and nomenclatures for peer counseling, such as peer support, peer support, peer mentoring and peer counseling. Although the terminologies found are named differently, there is discussion of the same application of a peer strategy for mental health purposes. However, it was also observed that such diversification in conceptual naming hinders the precise delimitation of the impact and effect of the application of peer counseling within this reality discussed (p. 26).

The lack of standardization in the application of the methodology found by Aguiar (2022) may represent an obstacle to the expansion of peer counselling, as well as the use of its full potential to intervene in mental health. Thus, seeking to complement and add to knowledge on the subject, and with Brazilian higher education as a context, the aim of this research is to briefly identify and describe Peer Counseling models in international scientific literature, with the expectation of providing results to support the discussion and development/expansion of the methodology in mental health.

2 METHODOLOGY

Guided by the question "How is the application of Peer Counseling described in the international scientific literature?" an integrative literature review was carried out - a methodology that provides the synthesis of knowledge and the incorporation of the applicability of the results of significant studies in practice (SOUZA; SILVA; CARVALHO, 2010). The database used for the searches was the journal collection platform of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). Two advanced searches were carried out on the platform with variations on the descriptors: "Peer counseling" (subject/content) AND College OR "Higher Education" OR University (any field/content) (Advanced Search 1); and "Peer Support" AND "Higher Education" (any field/content) AND "Mental health" (subject/content) (Advanced Search 2).

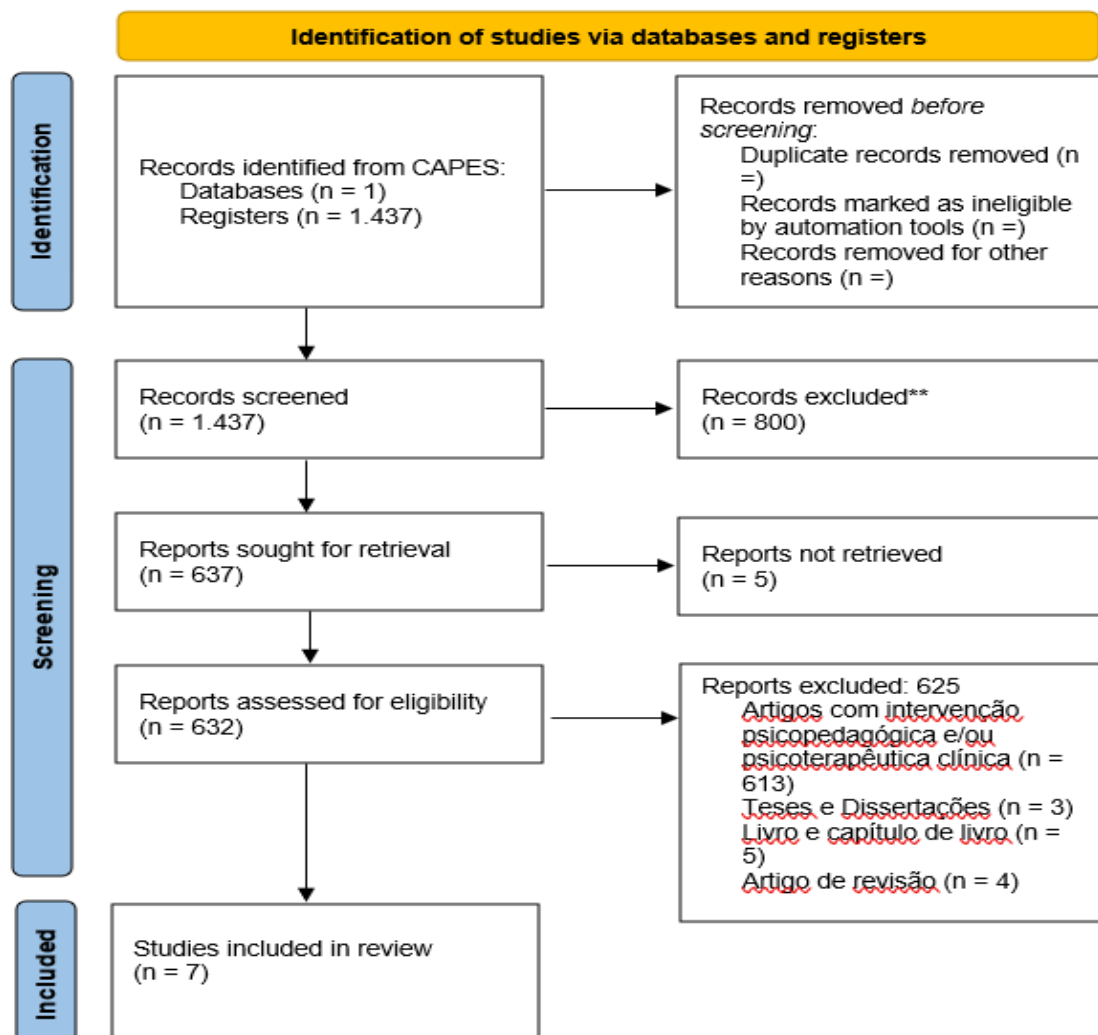
The inclusion criteria were indexed articles; peer-reviewed; published between 2011 and 2021; in English; describing a horizontal intervention; containing at least one descriptor in the title, subtitle, keyword, and/or abstract. And for exclusion: theses, dissertations, manuals, books, book chapters, review articles, and articles with psychopedagogical and/or clinical psychotherapeutic intervention.

In Advanced Search 1, 915 results were found; this number was reduced to 205 after applying the filters described in the inclusion criteria. These underwent a preliminary analysis by reading the title and abstract to confirm that they met the review criteria, leaving only four articles to be read in full. In Advanced Search 2, 522 results were obtained, reduced to 432 after applying the filters and then to three in the full reading phase.

3 RESULTS

Figure 1 details the article selection process, and Table 1 gives a summary of the articles. This is followed by a description of the model and the research applied in each of the articles, focusing on the points pertinent to this research.

Figure 1 - Summary of Advanced Searches on the CAPES¹ platform



¹ From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71. For more information, visit: <http://www.prisma-statement.org/>

Table 1 - Summary of articles selected for full reading

Title	Objective	Authorship	Publication	Location	Advanced Search
One Hundred Years of College Mental Health	To present a timeline of the implementation of mental health services in universities, including the practice of peer counseling, from 1910 to 2010.	KRAFT, D. P.	2011	United States of America	2
Mentor and protégé goal orientations as predictors of newcomer stress	To investigate how individual characteristics in the dyad of peers in formal mentoring programs interact to reduce the stress of students new to the university.	FULLICK, J. M. et al.	2012	United States of America	1
College Peer Counselor Teaching Modalities: Sequelae in the Life and Work of Graduates	To examine extended influences of peer help courses on self-reported experiences in interpersonal relationships, communication skills and continued engagement with training.	HATCHER, S. L. et al.	2014	United States of America	1
Empowering tertiary level students to solve their own study-related problems to improve study performance	To test the power of peer collaboration to offer support in the continuation of the degree.	NISHAT, N. et al.	2020	United Kingdom	1
Mental Health Literacy and Peer-to- Peer Counseling Referrals Among Community College Students	To fill the gap in the literature on the potential usefulness of Mental Health Literacy (MHL), considering the possibility of peer-to-peer referrals to mental health support services for university students.	KALKBRENNE R, M. T.; SINK, C. A.; SMITH, J. S.	2020	Portugal	2
Effect of a peer-led intervention combining mental health promotion with coping-strategybased workshops on mental health awareness, help-seeking behavior, and wellbeing among university students in Hong Kong	To evaluate the impact of a peer-led mental health intervention combined with group workshops based on coping strategies on mental health awareness and help-seeking among university students in Hong Kong.	AHORSU, D. K. et al.	2021	United Kingdom	2
Program evaluation of a student- led peer support service at a Canadian university	To investigate whether peer support is a viable form of support that benefits university students under stressful conditions.	SURESH, R. et al.	2021	United States of America	1

One hundred years of university mental health are chronicled in Kraft's article (2011). The author builds a timeline that goes back to the 18th century, when mental health problems were treated morally, and ends with the implementation of the peer counseling service in universities. Princeton University, in 1910, was the first to create a service dedicated to student mental health, which at the time focused on personality problems. Soon, other institutions followed suit, always including psychiatrists. Shortly afterward, the Mental Hygiene Movement erupted and mobilized even more discussions about mental health, which resulted in the presence of counselors on campuses since the number of psychiatrists was not enough to meet student demands.

The growth in mental health demands on campuses, the increase in political activities, and the abuse of alcohol and drugs by students were the contexts that led to the adoption of peer counseling. The article points out that students still prefer professional counseling to peer counseling, but that the latter has been sought in special areas such as sexuality and abusive relationships.

Fullick et al. (2012) investigated the interactive and additional effects of goal orientations on stress reduction in freshmen in a formal peer mentoring program. They tested the hypothesis that both career support and psychosocial support would be predictors of stress reduction. A mentor, according to the author, can be someone to turn to for information about classes, professional careers, the university, and everything that surrounds it. Mentoring is also a relationship between two individuals in which the more experienced one, the mentor, undertakes to provide development and socialization support for the less experienced one, the "protégé". It is called a formal peer mentoring program because the initiative comes from an academic organization and the mode of operation randomly matches new students with more experienced ones. The research procedures consisted of administering questionnaires to assess students' stress levels before the mentoring (control group) and one week after the end of the process (on this occasion, measures of mentoring behavior were also obtained). The results of the research were obtained by correlating the study variables and showed that the greater the psychosocial support and career support, the greater the reduction in stress. According to the author, the most interesting finding relates to the issue of compatibility between peers: students with a high-performance goal avoidance orientation who were accompanied by mentors with the same profile in this regard showed a significant reduction in stress, while students with a low-performance goal avoidance orientation who were accompanied by mentors with a high-

performance goal avoidance orientation had no significant changes in stress reduction. This finding corroborates the idea that:

In addition to mentor-protégé similarity in surface-level characteristics (for example, gender, race), similarity in deep-level characteristics, such as personality or goal orientation, also contributes to the success of mentoring relationships (FULLICK et al., 2012, p. 68).

In 2014, another study examined the self-reported influences of undergraduates who took a peer support course, highlighting interpersonal relationships, communication skills and involvement with the training (HATCHER, 2014). According to the author, peer counseling has adapted very well to the academic context, as it has proved to be largely effective in what it sets out to do. Considering that peer counselor training programs are increasingly seen as components of academic life, the research examined three groups of students: one who took a theoretical peer counseling course, one who took a theoretical and practical peer counseling course, and one who did not take any course. Questionnaires were sent to all participants, and they answered sociodemographic questions, structured questions about the impact of the courses on their relationships and communication, including current interactions with family, friends, and communication at work; as well as two validated subscales to assess adult forms of empathy. The results were presented through three factors: effect on interpersonal interaction, goals and engagement, and communication skills. The theoretical-practical course showed greater advantages in relation to the factors, but both types, of course, contributed positively to all three factors and the skills acquired were recognized by the research participants years after completion.

Nishat et al. (2020) carried out research applied to the university context with students from rural areas. The choice was based on statistics of adaptation stressors - mainly related to the change of address to continue studies, influencing academic performance and, consequently, resulting in dropout. A peer counseling group session was held with the students under the hypothesis that, after this intervention, their cumulative grade point average would improve, and they would be able to finish the course. A collaborative approach workshop was designed and conducted to help students help themselves. According to the authors, this collaborative approach is what differentiates the model they call Participatory Problem-Solving Intervention from traditional peer counseling. In this method, peers are those with similar problems but no training to act on them. Many participants involved in the workshop (60.3%) reported an increase in academic motivation and the development of skills to improve performance. In addition, it was observed that the students' proposals for solving problems were

not very different from those proposed by trained advisors. Therefore, the method turned out to be efficient as it contributes to academic success, has a low cost, and has little dependence on trained peers.

Suresh et al. (2021) investigated the effectiveness of a peer counseling program at a university in Canada. The study highlights the reluctance of students to seek mental health help, possibly attributing it to the stigma surrounding the topic, low self-perception, lack of time, privacy concerns or a hierarchical approach. The authors point out that the literature in the area demonstrates the benefits of peer counseling courses and workshops to intervene in this problem, but little is described about the modality in the academic context. After a complete analysis of three questionnaires answered by 1043 students and 797 volunteer counselors, the results showed that the public using the service is diverse in terms of sex, gender, and ethnicity. Students reported low levels of well-being and moderate levels of anxiety and depression. As for the peer counseling service, they rated it as easy to use and trusted it as an alternative for help when they can't access professional mental health services. The counselors reported feeling validated in their roles and safe to offer help to their peers. The methodology did what it set out to do, mainly by creating an empathetic, confidential, non-judgmental, and non-directive environment; for these reasons, the program was trusted by the students, according to the authors. Another result was that students attend the services more during the mid-semester evaluation period. Of these, the majority seek the service simply because they want to talk to someone else, due to general and academic stress, anxiety, or a self-perceived depressed state. As for users, more women (than men) and bisexuals (than heterosexuals) attend the peer counseling service.

Kalkbrenner et al. (2020) write about peer counseling that occurs naturally in universities. Mental Health Literacy names the set of attitudes and behaviors of the academic community around help-seeking actions, knowledge about warning signs and resources for mental distress and reducing stigma around the topic. This definition is similar to mental health "literacy", with the aim of empowering students so that they feel competent to help their peers in everyday life. A total of 485 people took part in this study, answering a sociodemographic questionnaire and another on recognizing signs of mental distress. Analysis of the questionnaires highlighted three important dimensions for promoting mental health on campus: knowledge, stigma and seeking help. The correlation between the study variables showed that the greater the knowledge about warning signs of poor mental health, the greater the sense of responsibility from one peer to another, culminating in contact and referral to seek help.

Ahorso et al. (2021) investigated the effect of a peer-led intervention combining mental health promotion with workshops based on coping strategies on mental health awareness, help-seeking, and well-being among students at a university in Hong Kong. Because of stigma, it was suggested that a student-led group strategy aimed at students would have a positive social effect in relation to mental health promotion. The results proved the positive impact of peer-led programs; because of the peers, the intervention had high acceptability. In addition, the program showed potential, especially in the dimension of mental health awareness and knowledge of coping strategies.

4 DISCUSSION

The findings of the advanced searches showed a significant concentration of North American publications (62.5%). Although this figure is followed by European countries such as the United Kingdom and Portugal, there is still a strong concentration in the countries in which peer counseling emerged, the United States and the United Kingdom (Table 1). Considering the limited scope of this integrative review because it used only one database, these results point to the lack of research, publications, and reports on the experiences of implementing peer counseling in more countries.

All the articles approached mental health from perspectives compatible with the rationale of this work, considering the integral concept of health and the precepts of critical school psychology. This is supported by the different areas covered in the articles, which, despite this trait, unanimously converged on the promotion of mental health. Of the seven articles resulting from the integrative review, five set out to analyze some impact produced on mental health from variations in the use of peer counseling, and all obtained promising and effective results within their research contexts (AHORSU et al., 2021; FULLICK et al., 2012; HATCHER et al., 2014; NISHAN et al., 2020; SURESH et al., 2021). In these cases, peer counseling was effective in a) reducing the stress of freshmen and seniors; b) improving interpersonal relationships and communication skills; c) offering support in the continuity of graduation, contributing to academic success; d) coping with difficult mental health situations and seeking help. These results also support the adaptability of the proposed methodology: peer counseling has been described in the form of courses, workshops, mentoring, etc. In all of them, it proved to be suitable for the purpose based on the results, which strengthens its flexibility to,

within the context of higher education, dialog with different sub-contexts according to the demands and dispositions of each environment.

Another noteworthy convergence between the findings is the issue of the assumption of trust based on the relationship between peers, predicting a positive level of acceptability. Suresh et al. (2021) highlight the trust that the peer counseling program received from the research participants; they considered the service as an alternative for when they could not get professional care. This corroborates Kraft's (2011) assertion that students still prefer professional counseling. The same author mentions, on the other hand, that for dealing with special situations such as sexuality and abusive relationships, and for specific audiences (women and bisexuals), peer counseling has been more sought after, which also presupposes the existence of greater trust for openness. Ahorso et al. (2021) also discussed the authors when they adhered to horizontality in their research because of the stigmas present in the academic environment: it was assumed that this arrangement would have a positive social effect and would be indicative of greater acceptability for students to adhere to it. Both hypotheses were supported by the results obtained.

In terms of the efficiency of the response to mental health promotion, peer counseling remains a mainstay. In the case of some universities, the methodology was implemented precisely to respond to the high number of mental health demands (KRAFT, 2011). And although some of these demands also require a clinical and pharmacological approach, in which peer counseling can be complementary to individual clinical treatment, there are demands that can be fully met by the peer service. In their research, Suresh et al. (2021) observed that many students who sought out the counseling service simply wanted to talk to someone else, due to general and academic stress, anxiety or self-perception of a depressed state.

The topic discussed by Kalkbrenner et al. (2020) is also considered to be of great relevance, given the possibility of using the academic environment as both a focus and an actor in mental health interventions. These authors work with the concept of Mental Health Literacy to systematize a set of knowledge and behaviors to identify signs of mental health impairment and be able to offer appropriate help. This proposal involves empowering the student and fosters a sense of responsibility, with benefits for both sides of the relationship. It is pertinent because it considers the informal counseling that takes place in the academic environment: a single student lives daily with several students who, in turn, live with more students, and so on; in addition, there is the factor that Fullick et al. (2012) highlight in their research: the naturalness with which pairs are formed within a context. When pairs are formed randomly (by contextual

conditions), it is suggested that there is a relational bond between them that can be optimized to contribute to the well-being of those involved. Thus, it can be highly beneficial to explore relationships in the academic environment, in the sense of the potential reach and effectiveness in the possibility of guiding the students themselves, in addition to the empowerment factor involved that falls into a type of developmental intervention, such as critical school psychology suggests as effective in dealing with mental health: not just treating the problem or anticipating it but preparing the individual to deal with possible problems.

Considering what has been said and discussed, and reiterating the aim of this research, it is believed that based on the models described for peer counseling, this methodology could also be a promising option for Brazilian higher education. The articles selected show the versatility and adaptability of this methodology, which makes it more comfortable for individuals to share problems in their lives, given that common experience and horizontality underpin a much more consistent relational bond than in an arrangement where those involved are not peers in any way. In mental health, the proposal has been evaluated as effective despite being relatively new in the field. The benefits of peer counseling are observable on both sides and are reflected in the student's personal and academic lives, as already mentioned. The limitations are also pertinent, especially those that focus on the state of the people who are willing to advise (HARISSON; GORDON, 2021), but they do not suggest inconsistency with the development and expansion of peer counseling; the difficulties arising from the fact that the methodology has existed in the field for a short time will gradually be overcome as more research is carried out in the area and more implementation experiences are shared. However, it is true that with the growing demand for mental health intervention at a non-clinical level, the proposal shows great potential.

5 CONCLUSION

Returning to the guiding question of this work and the objective of briefly identifying and describing Peer Counseling models in international scientific literature with the expectation of providing results to support discussion and the development/expansion of the methodology in mental health, Peer Counseling is efficient and promising. The precepts of empathy and horizontality are positive predictors for guaranteeing quality in the relationship and the acceptability of the proposal. The flexibility of the methodology in terms of its application format is also a strong point. It is believed that peer counseling can act to promote mental health

by focusing on developmental aspects, especially with demands of a non-clinical nature, which are considered to have a high incidence due to the stressors imposed by the academic environment.

It is also believed that this research contributes to broadening the debate on the subject and serves as a parameter for the dissemination of the methodology in the country, especially in higher education. A limitation of the research is the volume of publications covered, which, if more than one database was used, could have been greater and provided a more consistent picture of peer counseling in international literature. It is hoped that more research will be carried out in this exploratory sense to lay the foundations for the development of the methodology in Brazil.

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