



PROFILE OF ANXIETY IN PENITENTIARY AGENTS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Some professions have potential stressors that can trigger psychological disorders such as anxiety. In this sense, security professionals may be highly susceptible to developing anxiety disorders due to the characteristics of their work segment. Thus, the aim of our study was to evaluate the profile of anxiety among penitentiary agents that work in a prison located in the northwest of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. The sample consisted of 47 workers (8 women and 39 men) aged between 25 and 53 years. To assess and classify anxiety levels, participants responded to the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). The data were submitted to descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi-square test and the means compared by the student's t test ($p < 0.05$). There was a higher frequency of individuals with low anxiety levels ($p < 0.05$) and those who reported using psychotropic treatments had higher scores of state anxiety ($p < 0.05$). There was no significant difference in anxiety scores when comparing genders and in relation to living with pets. We concluded that, in the sample evaluated of penitentiary agents, there is a higher prevalence of anxiety at a low level, with the use of psychotropic drugs associated with higher levels of this disorder.

KEYWORDS: Anxiety. Security professionals. Penitentiary.

PERFIL DE ANSIEDADE EM AGENTES DE UM PRESÍDIO: ESTUDO DE CASO

RESUMO

Algumas profissões apresentam potenciais agentes estressores que podem desencadear transtornos psicológicos como a ansiedade. Neste sentido, profissionais de segurança podem ser altamente susceptíveis a desenvolver quadros de ansiedade devido às características presentes em seu setor laboral. Assim, objetivou-se com este estudo, avaliar o perfil de ansiedade em agentes penitenciários trabalhadores de um presídio situado no noroeste do estado de Minas Gerais. A amostra foi composta por 47 servidores (oito mulheres e 39 homens) com idade entre 25 e 53 anos. Para avaliação e classificação dos níveis de ansiedade, os participantes responderam ao Inventário de Ansiedade Traço-Estado (IDATE). Os dados foram submetidos à estatística descritiva, análise de variância (ANOVA) e teste do qui-quadrado e as médias comparadas pelo teste de t de *student* ($p < 0,05$). Observou-se uma maior frequência de indivíduos com baixo nível de ansiedade ($p < 0,05$), sendo que aqueles que relataram uso de medicamentos psicotrópicos apresentaram maiores escores de ansiedade estado ($p < 0,05$). Não foi observada diferença significativa nos escores de ansiedade na comparação entre gêneros e com relação ao convívio com animais de estimação. Concluiu-se que, na amostra avaliada de agentes penitenciários, houve maior prevalência de ansiedade em nível baixo, sendo o uso de fármacos psicotrópicos associado a níveis mais elevados deste transtorno.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ansiedade. Profissionais de segurança. Penitenciária.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is an emotional state resulting from atypical feelings of tension, apprehension, concern, restlessness and fear about uncertain situations that have not yet happened (SHAPIRO et al., 2014). Thus, in face of a challenge or a stressful situation, the body develops coping strategies to adapt to it and, when this process is not effective, psychosomatic manifestations occur that impair physical and mental well-being. (FLECK, 2000). Anxiety can be originated from a situational condition or from the individual's personality, and in both cases, it can negatively interfere with concentration and ways of solving common daily problems (CHAVES; CADE, 2002).

Considering these characteristics of anxiety, the Trait-State Anxiety Inventory (STAI) has been considered one of the most important instruments used to quantitatively assess the components considered subjective about this condition (BIAGGIO et al., 1977). Developed by Spielberger et al. (1970) and translated into Portuguese by Biaggio et al. (1977), this instrument presents a scale that allows assessing anxiety both in the state (STAI-State) and trait (STAI-Trait) dimensions. State anxiety is a transient emotional condition characterized by unpleasant feelings of conscious tension and apprehension that are perceived by the individual and increase the activity of the Sympathetic Autonomic Nervous System (LEAL et al., 2017). Trait anxiety, on the other hand, is related to the characteristics of an individual, that is, in his reactions to situations perceived as threatening, which increases the intensities in the state of anxiety (BIAGGIO et al., 1977).

Some professions may be more prone to anxiety than others (ANDRADE et al., 2020). In this sense, prison officers are essential workers for the functioning of

correctional Institution, which are often subject to situations that generate anxiety because they work under pressure and are subject to risk of death and receive little recognition from society (BEZERRA et al., 2016). Furthermore, it is considered that this professional group is poorly evaluated in studies due to the difficulty of access by correctional institutions (BEZERRA et al., 2016).

In this sense, considering that prison officers are subject to several factors that can trigger anxiety, the aim of this study was to evaluate the profile of anxiety in prison officers in a prison in northwestern of Minas Gerais state.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The study included 47 prison officers (eight women and 39 men) aged between 25 and 53 years, employees of the Agostinho de Oliveira Júnior Penitentiary in the city of Unaí, Minas Gerais. The sample comprised only the servers that being in service during 2019 October, which was the period of data collection. At the time of data collection, the prison population was 688 individuals. After filling out the Informed Consent Form (ICF), the agents voluntarily responded to the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) (SPIELBERGER et al., 1970).

Instrument

STAI is a tool developed by Spielberger et al. (1970) that allows to evaluate anxiety in the state (STAI-State) and trait (STAI-Trait) dimensions. This inventory presents 40 questions (20 related to STAI-State and another 20 to STAI-Trait) with the possibility of answering on a Likert scale of four points (“almost never,” “sometimes,” “often” and “almost always”). Anxiety levels, both state and trait, were obtained by the sum of the values founded after converting responses into numbers. Thus, the higher the calculated result, the greater the level of anxiety presented by the respondent. Thus, for each STAI dimension there is a possibility of results ranging from a minimum of 20 points to a maximum of 80 points (GERRETH et al., 2019). Additionally, classifications regarding the level of anxiety were assigned, where results between 20 and 40 being classified as "low", between 41 and 60 "moderate" and between 61 and 80 points as "high" level of anxiety (GERRETH et al., 2019). At the end of the STAI, were inserted questions about aspects such as gender, living with pets and the use of psychotropic drugs.

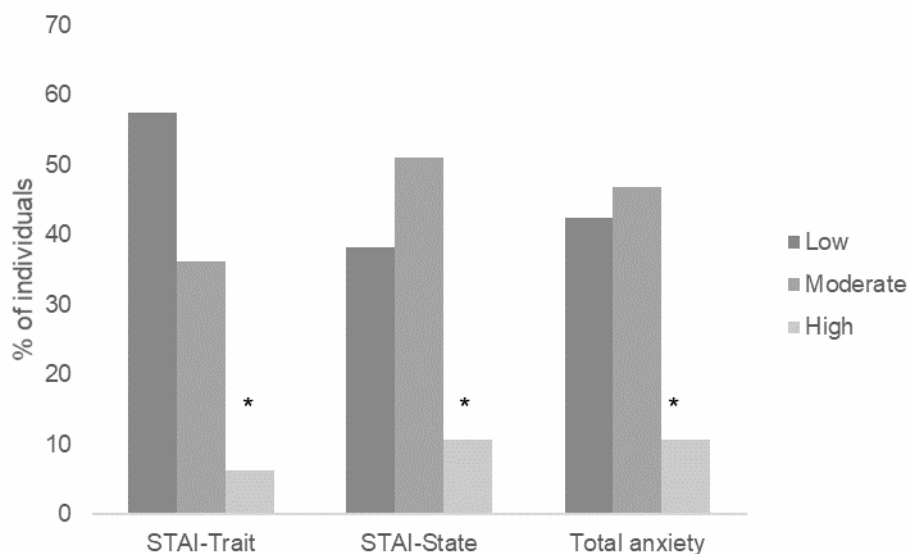
Statistical Analysis

The data were submitted to descriptive statistics and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the means were compared by Student's t test. The frequency of individuals located in each anxiety level was compared using the chi-square test. Significant differences were a probability level less than 5% ($p < 0.05$). The data were analyzed using the statistical software BioEstat 5.3 (AYRES et al., 2007).

RESULTS

There was observed a lower prevalence of individuals classified with high anxiety level compared to those classified as low and moderate in STAI-State, STAI-Trait and in total anxiety, respectively ($p < 0,05$ - Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 - Prevalence of penitentiary agents classified with different levels of anxiety.



* Lower anxiety level.

Regarding anxiety scores, there were no significant differences in the comparison between both gender and living with pets for any of the anxiety classifications (Table 1). The scores of STAI-Trait were higher in participants who reported using psychotropic drugs compared to those that declared did not use them ($p < 0.05$). However, there were no differences for this aspect in the STAI-State and in the total anxiety score (Table 1).

TABLE 1 - Anxiety scores in penitentiary agents.

Characteristics (n)		STAI-Trait			STAI-State			Total anxiety		
		Mean	SD	p	Mean	SD	p	Mean	SD	p
Total Sample (47)		41.25	10.33	-	45.00	9.23	-	86.25	18.55	-
Gender	Female (8)	45.12	12.12	0.64	45.13	7.43	0.97	90.25	7.43	0.60
	Male (39)	40.46	9.69		44.97	9.61		85.43	18.36	
Living with pet	Yes (7)	43.14	11.30	0.67	46.57	5.22	0.70	89.71	15.10	0.67
	No (40)	40.92	10.16		44.72	9.91		85.65	19.13	
Uses psychotropic medication	Yes (5)	51.6	8.72	0.04	51.40	12.32	0.19	103.00	19.06	0.07
	No (42)	39.78	9.64		44.23	8.71		84.02	17.40	

DISCUSSION

In this study, a higher prevalence of prison officers classified with low anxiety was observed. These results are surprising, since this class of workers often experiences stressful situations that can generate anxiety (BEZERRA et al., 2016; BONEZ et al. 2017). Several studies report high levels of anxiety in this work area (BEZERRA et al., 2016; LIMA et al., 2019; REINERT et al. 2019). High intensities of anxiety were observed in prison agents of a penitentiary in the State of Mato Grosso before being submitted to three weeks of auriculotherapy (GRAÇA et al., 2020). However, corroborating the results found in the present study, Bonez et al. (2017) observed that most of agents that working in a prison in the state of Santa Catarina presented low levels of anxiety and no degree of depression and hopelessness. Even so, the aforementioned authors warn about the need for mental health care in this class of workers, since levels of anxiety and stress can increase rapidly.

Penitentiary officers are daily subjected to situations of discomfort, psychological pressure and work overload that could promote psychosomatic symptoms (BONEZ et al., 2017). In addition, it is considered that the prison work environment causes fear of physical injuries, leaving these individuals often alert and vigilant inside and outside the work environment (LIMA et al., 2019).

The higher prevalence of agents with a low level of anxiety observed was due to some variable or coping strategy not investigated in the present study. This argument can be reinforced by the discrepancy observed in this present study between individuals who declare itself as users of psychotropic drugs compared to those who do not use. The literature reports high consumption of these kind of drugs on servers in the security area (FIGUEIRÓ et al., 2015; BADRU et al., 2018). In a study carried out with correctional officers in a Nigerian prison, a directly proportional relationship was observed between the use of psychotropic drugs and the presence of anxiety and depression (BADRU et al., 2018). These results corroborate those observed in the present study for STAI-Trait, where higher trait anxiety scores were founded in agents who declare itself as users of psychotropic drugs.

Regarding gender, in the present study no significant difference was founded between anxiety scores among men and women. This is another intriguing result of this study, since the literature reports that anxiety affects mainly women than men (STEIMER, 2011; ANDRADE et al., 2018; ANDRADE et al., 2020). Additionally, it has been reported that, in prison agents' sample, female women have higher levels of anxiety when compared men. (SILVA et al., 2017).

In this study, it was also investigated if living with pets influences anxiety levels, and no significant difference was observed among the agents. In a previous study (ANDRADE et al., 2018) it was observed that university students who live with pets have lower levels of anxiety in the STAI-State. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that the presence of pet can alleviate anxiety in groups that have a high prevalence of anxiety at high levels, as was the case with university students (ANDRADE et al., 2018).

Considering that STAI is a psychometric instrument that allows observes only quantitative results, it is important that future studies assess qualitative aspects, for example, through analysis of discourse in this specific population. Macedo et al. (2008) reported that analysis of discourse in health studies allows the interpretation of reality and the identification of contradictions with quantitative results.

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