



RESEARCH

Burnout syndrome and its link to emotional intelligence in nursing students**Síndrome de burnout y su relación con la inteligencia emocional en estudiantes de enfermería****Síndrome de burnout e sua relação com a inteligência emocional em estudantes de enfermagem**Carolina Sánchez-Alvarez ¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7518-4578>Cristian Lermenda-Peña ² <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8458-0170>Yaritza Becerra-Torres ³ <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1261-7997>Ignacio Astudillo-Ganora ^{4*} <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0709-1497>

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Abstract

Introduction: Burnout syndrome is a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. It has emerged as a significant concern in the healthcare field, particularly among nursing students. **Objective:** To analyze the association between burnout syndrome and emotional intelligence in nursing students at a private university in Santiago, Chile, during the second semester of 2023. **Methodology:** A quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional study that involves 268 nursing students from a Chilean university. Inclusion criteria consisted of being enrolled in the program, being between the first and eighth semester, and voluntary participation. Emotional intelligence was measured using the Trait Meta Mood Scale 24. Burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory Scale, adapted to Spanish, both validated for the population. Participants signed an informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured. Data were analyzed using Excel and SPSS with descriptive statistics. **Results:** 43.6 % of participants presented a moderate burnout level, 41 % showed a mild level, and the remaining 15.3 % experienced a severe degree of the syndrome. In the emotional attention subscale, most students indicated difficulty directing their attention toward their feelings, suggesting a lack of emotional awareness in the student population. **Conclusion:** The findings of this study highlight the need to develop specific strategies to improve students' attention to, understanding of, and regulation of emotions as part of broader efforts to prevent and address burnout in educational settings.

Key words: Psychological exhaustion; Emotional Intelligence; Nursing, Burnout (DeCS).

Resumen

Introducción: El síndrome de burnout, es una condición caracterizada por agotamiento emocional, despersonalización y reducida realización personal y ha surgido como una preocupación significativa en el ámbito de la salud, particularmente entre los estudiantes de enfermería. **Objetivo:** Analizar la asociación entre el síndrome de Burnout y la inteligencia emocional en estudiantes de enfermería de una universidad privada en Santiago de Chile, el segundo semestre del año 2023. **Metodología:** Estudio cuantitativo, descriptivo y transversal, con 268 estudiantes de enfermería de una universidad chilena. Los criterios de inclusión fueron estar matriculado en la carrera, cursar entre el primer y octavo semestre, y participar voluntariamente. La inteligencia emocional se midió con el instrumento Trait Meta Mood Scale 24. El burnout se evaluó con escala Maslach Burnout Inventory adaptada a estudiantes en español, ambas validadas para la población. Los participantes firmaron consentimiento informado y se garantizó confidencialidad. Los datos fueron analizados mediante estadísticas descriptivas. **Resultados:** El 43.6 % de los participantes presentó nivel moderado de burnout, el 41 % nivel leve y 15.3 % un grado profundo. En subescala atención emocional indicaron la mayoría de los estudiantes presentar dificultades en dirigir su atención hacia sus sentimientos, lo que sugiere falta de conciencia emocional en la población estudiantil. **Conclusiones:** Los hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de desarrollar estrategias específicas para mejorar la atención, comprensión y regulación emocional de los estudiantes como parte de los esfuerzos más amplios para prevenir y abordar el burnout en el ámbito educativo.

Palabras clave: Agotamiento psicológico; Inteligencia Emocional; Enfermería, Burnout (DeCS).



Abstrato

Introdução: A síndrome de Burnout, condição caracterizada por exaustão emocional, despersonalização e redução da realização pessoal, tem surgido como uma preocupação significativa na área da saúde, principalmente entre estudantes de enfermagem. **Objetivo:** Analisar a associação entre o síndrome de burnout e a inteligência emocional em estudantes de enfermagem de uma universidade privada em Santiago, Chile, durante o segundo semestre de 2023. **Metodologia:** O estudo foi quantitativo, descritivo e transversal, com 268 estudantes de enfermagem de uma universidade chilena. Os critérios de inclusão foram estar matriculado no curso, estar entre o primeiro e o oitavo semestre, e participar voluntariamente. A inteligência emocional foi medida com o Escala de Meta Humor de Traços 24. O burnout foi avaliado com o Escala de Inventário de Burnout de Maslach adaptado para o espanhol, ambos validados para a população. Os participantes assinaram o consentimento informado e foi garantida a confidencialidade. Os dados foram analisados usando Excel e SPSS com estatísticas descritivas. **Resultados:** 43,6 % dos participantes apresentam um nível moderado de burnout, enquanto 41 % apresentam um nível leve e 15 % apresentam um nível moderado de burnout. Os restantes 0,3 % apresentam um grau profundo desta síndrome. Na subescala de atenção emocional, a maioria dos alunos indicou dificuldade em direcionar sua atenção para seus sentimentos, sugerindo uma falta de consciência emocional na população estudantil. **Conclusão:** Estas conclusões também destacam a necessidade de desenvolver estratégias específicas para melhorar a atenção, compreensão e regulação emocional dos alunos como parte de esforços mais amplos para prevenir e abordar o esgotamento na educação.

Palavras-chave: Esgotamento psicológico; Inteligência Emocional; Enfermagem, Burnout (DeCS).

Introduction

Burnout syndrome is a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal fulfillment, hence becoming a significant health concern particularly among nursing students ⁽¹⁾. Therefore, the burnout syndrome raises important challenges to well being and academic effectiveness due to its physical, mental and emotional repercussions ^(2,3).

The concept of burnout was originally seen in the novel “A burn out case” by Graham Greene in 1960 and it was formally associated to fatigue and frustration by Freudenberg in 1974, a psychoanalyst who described the syndrome as a whole emotional and physical exhaustion, and apathy from work ^(4,5). Despite its initial appearance, the phenomenon was underestimated and considered a taboo in many workplaces. However, there was a noticeable change in the perception



of the syndrome after the publication of the first articles; professionals started validating its existence and working hazards. This new scenario propelled the attention and researches about the topic ^(2,6).

The nursing program, characterized by its demanding nature and constant exposure to stressful situations, carries an inherent risk of developing burnout ⁽⁷⁾. This phenomenon not only affects students' quality of life, but it can also compromise the care and attention provided to patients. Understanding the underlying factors that contribute to burnout, as well as effective strategies for managing it, is essential to comprehensively address this challenge in the academic training of future nurses ⁽⁸⁾. Academic burnout is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a loss of purpose in academic activities. It occurs when students experience psychological overload, loss of motivation, and self-doubt ⁽⁸⁾.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as those of others, enabling effective social interaction and more accurate clinical decision-making ^(8,9). Self-perception of EI involves the conscious perception, understanding, and regulation of one's own emotions; it acts as a protective factor against negative emotional burden, and it enhances skills such as empathy and clinical decision-making ⁽¹⁰⁾. This ability has been linked to a lower perception of stress, anxiety, and depression in healthcare students, suggesting its importance in both academic and clinical settings. EI plays a crucial role in the context of nursing academic programs: students who possess emotional intelligence are able to surmount the demands of the clinical environment, maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, and adopt effective coping strategies when faced with stress, which could contribute to preventing the development of burnout syndrome ^(10,11).



In this context, there is a need to examine the relationship between EI and the burnout syndrome in nursing students. Understanding the way emotional skills influence the experience of burnout can provide valuable information to design preventive interventions and personalized development programs⁽¹²⁾. The research question was: What is the link between the burnout syndrome and EI in nursing students at a private university in Santiago, Chile, during the second semester of 2023? This research is relevant to nursing science, as it addresses a fundamental issue for the well-being of future healthcare professionals.

The objective of this research was to analyze the connection between the burnout syndrome and EI in nursing students at a private university in Santiago, Chile, during the second semester of 2023. By analyzing the relationship between burnout and EI, we seek to identify factors that may influence the mental health of nursing students, which has implications for the development of preventive and support strategies in educational and professional fields^(10,11).

Methodology

A quantitative, observational, descriptive, and cross-sectional study that aimed at exploring the possibility of observing academic burnout and EI among nursing students at a Chilean university. The sample consisted of 268 students who met the inclusion criteria: to be enrolled in the program during the period of the research, attend between the first and eighth academic semesters, participate freely, and have signed the informed consent.

Data collection was carried out using a structured survey administered in a single session under the direct supervision of the researchers. EI was measured using the Trait Meta Mood Scale 24 (TMMS-24), validated for the Chilean population in 2020. The assessment scale consisted of 24 items, with a Likert scale of 1 to 5. Scores are equalled to obtain a total ranging from 8 to 40 points for each of the three subscales: Emotional Attention, Emotional Understanding, and Emotional



Regulation. Each subscale has three score ranges: in the Emotional Perception Subscale, medium scores indicate suitable perception (22 to 32 for men; 25 to 35 for women), while high or low scores indicate areas for improvement. In the Understanding Subscale, low scores suggest a need for improvement (<25 for men, <23 for women), while high scores indicate excellent understanding (>36 for men, >35 for women). In the emotional regulation subscale, low scores indicate a need for improvement (<23 for men and women), medium scores indicate suitable regulation (24 to 35 for men and 24 to 34 for women), and high scores indicate excellent emotional regulation (>36 for men, >35 for women). The TMMS-24 presented suitable psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.82 and 0.85, indicating high reliability (13). In the present study, the scale obtained a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.80, which reaffirmed the reliability of the instrument used in the study ⁽¹³⁾.

On the other hand, the Maslach Burnout Inventory adapted for students (MBI-SS) was used to measure burnout, validated in Spanish in 2022. The questionnaire assesses academic burnout syndrome and consists of 15 items, using three subscales: Physical and psychological exhaustion (five items), Cynicism (four items), and Academic self-efficacy (six items). Each subscale consists of items that are scored on a seven-point frequency scale, from 0 (never) to 7 (always). High scores on exhaustion and cynicism and low scores on self-efficacy are indicative of burnout, categorized as mild, moderate, or profound ^(15,16). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the Burnout, Cynicism, and Efficacy subscales were 0.86, 0.85, and 0.72 respectively, reflecting good reliability for the first two and acceptable reliability for Efficacy ⁽¹⁴⁾. It is worth noting that in the present investigation the scale obtained consistent Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for all three subscales: Burnout (0.82), Cynicism (0.81), and Efficacy (0.80), which reaffirmed the reliability of the instrument in the target population ^(14,15).



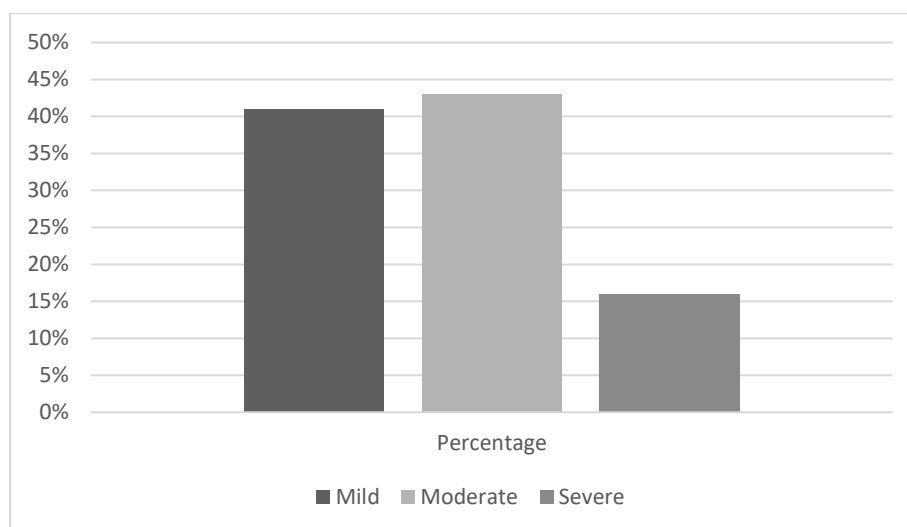
This research was approved by the field coordinators and university administrators, respecting and protecting identities and sensitive data. Participants received a detailed explanation of the study's purpose and instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. Confidentiality and security of the information collected were ensured, in accordance with the recommendations of the Declaration of Helsinki.

In order to analyze the study results, Excel software was used to create a database. SPSS software was then used to perform descriptive statistical analyses of the questionnaires, using the Chi-square test (X^2).

Results

The students had an average age of 22 years old (SD=3), and the gender distribution was 78 % female and 22 % male. It was observed that 43.6 % of the participants presented a moderate level of burnout, while 41 % had a mild level, and the remaining 15.3% experienced a severe level of this syndrome (Chart 1).

Chart 1. Levels of Burnout in students (in percentage), 2023 (n=268)



Source: Self-developed



When measuring EI in emotional attention, the results indicated that 61.5 % needed to improve their attention to their own feelings, 19.7 % paid suitable attention to their emotions, and 18.6 % paid excessive attention to their emotions and feelings. In emotional understanding, 58.9 % needed to improve the understanding of their feelings, while 35.8 % had excellent understanding of their feelings. Finally, in emotional regulation, 59.9 % needed to improve their emotional regulation, and 33.9 % had excellent emotional regulation.

Regarding the relationship between the burnout level and the distribution of responses on the emotional attention subscale, 47.6 % of those categorized as mild burnout presented adequate emotional attention, 42.8 % paid excessive attention to their feelings, and 96 % needed to improve their attention to emotions and feelings. Of those categorized as moderate burnout, 97.3 % needed to improve their attention to their feelings and emotions, and the remaining 27 % paid excessive attention to their feelings and emotions. Finally, 100 % of those categorized as severely burnout needed to improve their attention to their feelings and emotions.

On the other hand, in the relationship between burnout level and the emotional understanding subscale among students with mild burnout, 85.7 % had an excellent understanding of their emotions and feelings, and 14.3 % had a suitable understanding of their emotions and feelings. In the case of students with moderate burnout, 100 % fell into the category that needed to improve their level of understanding of emotions and feelings. In the case of students with severe burnout, 100 % improved their level of understanding of emotions and feelings. Finally, concerning the relationship between burnout level and emotional regulation, 88 % of those with mild burnout showed excellent regulation of their emotions and feelings, and the remaining 12 % showed suitable regulation of emotions and feelings. Then, all of students with moderate burnout improved



their regulation of emotions and feelings, the same scenario as those students with deep burnout, development had to improve their regulation of feelings and emotions, (Table 1).

Table 1. Burnout levels and their relationship to emotional intelligence, year 2023 (n=268)

Burnout Level	Emotional Attention (%)	Emotional Understanding (%)	Emotional Regulation (%)
Low	Suitable 47.6 %	Excellent 85.7 %	Excellent 88 %
	Excessive 42.8 %	Suitable 14.3 %	Suitable 12 %
	Deficient 9.6 %		
Mild	Deficient 97.3 %	Deficient 100 %	Deficient 100 %
	Excessive 2.7 %		
Deep	Deficient 100 %	Deficient 100 %	Deficient 100 %

Source: Self-developed

Discussion

The present study explored the association between the burnout syndrome and EI in nursing students. The results revealed certain patterns in how students perceived, understood, and regulated their own emotions, and how these patterns were associated with their level of burnout.

In the first place, the results of the emotional attention subscale indicated that most students had difficulty directing their attention toward their feelings, suggesting a lack of emotional awareness in this student population. This finding is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the importance of emotional attention as a fundamental component of EI ^(15,17). Hyperattention to emotional states was also observed in a considerable number of students, which could indicate a tendency toward emotional rumination ^(18,19), and a greater susceptibility to stress and burnout ^(20,21).

In addition, in the emotional understanding subscale was observed that most students needed to improve their ability to understand and interpret their own emotional states. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of burnout, since a lack of emotional understanding can make it difficult to identify and manage the stressors that contribute to the syndrome. The need to improve emotional understanding is especially prominent among students with moderate to severe levels of burnout, suggesting greater emotional vulnerability in this population ⁽²²⁾.



Regarding the emotional regulation subscale, a significant amount of students were observed to experience difficulties in effectively regulating their emotions. This finding is consistent with previous literature that has linked poor emotional regulation with an increased risk of burnout ^(23,24). The results suggest that students with moderate to severe burnout have a particularly high need to improve their emotional regulation skills to mitigate the adverse effects of stress and burnout on their well-being, dysfunctional study behaviors, and other adverse experiences in their personal and academic lives ⁽²⁵⁾.

The study not only explores the relationship between burnout and EI, but also provides relevant information on each variable separately. The high prevalence of burnout in nursing students underscores the need for prevention and management strategies, while the findings on EI highlight areas for improvement in emotional training, reinforcing the importance of including this component in education.

Furthermore, the results show that many students experience difficulties in emotional regulation, understanding, and attention of their feelings; key aspects of stress management. At the same time, the analysis of burnout reveals that a considerable amount of students experience moderate to high levels of the syndrome, highlighting the need for specific interventions. These findings validate the study and reinforce its contribution to knowledge about the emotional health of future nursing professionals.

Among the study's main limitations is the predominance of women in the majority of the sample, which could influence the generalization of the findings regarding gender. In addition, since it was a cross-sectional study, the relationship between burnout and EI is analyzed at a specific point in time, without assessing its evolution over time. Also, the use of self-reports may reflect subjective perceptions of the participants. However, the findings reflect patterns consistent with previous



literature and highlight key areas for intervention. Furthermore, they provide a significant basis for future research that delves deeper into these aspects through longitudinal approaches and complementary methodologies, contributing to the development of effective strategies for student well-being.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that nursing students face significant challenges regarding emotional awareness, understanding, and regulation-key aspects of EI. Difficulty directing attention toward one's own emotional states, as well as a lack of understanding and adequate regulation of emotions, appear to be closely linked to burnout levels in this population. These findings underscore the importance of fostering the development of emotional skills in nursing students, as greater emotional awareness and more effective regulation could act as protective mechanisms against stress and burnout, improving their overall well-being and academic and professional performance. It is crucial that healthcare educational institutions implement training programs that address these emotional aspects, in order to contribute to the prevention of burnout and the promotion of a healthier and more sustainable learning environment.

Conflict of Interest

The authors stated that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that they have not used any type of artificial intelligence resources in any sections of this manuscript.



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