

## Emotional Exhaustion And Depression In Health Professionals In The Post-Pandemic Context: A Systematic Review

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study was to analyze the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression in health professionals in the post-pandemic context. To this end, a systematic literature review was carried out using inclusion criteria that included articles published on the Scielo and Google Scholar platforms. Only articles of Brazilian nationality and published between 2022 and 2023 were selected. The articles were analyzed in two stages: initial screening and full screening. As a result, a sample of 5 articles was obtained, where it was possible to verify the influence of the work environment on the prevalence of emotional overload and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic scenario. The impacts on the provision of health services, related to reduced agility and quality of care, underline the interdependence between the mental health of professionals and the effectiveness of the health system as a whole. The review highlights, specifically for nursing professionals, the persistence of both mental and physical challenges, emphasizing the importance of effective strategies for emotional support, improving working conditions and promoting healthy environments. In the medical profession, the growing prevalence of burnout syndrome, especially in intensive care medicine, underlines the urgent need to address the prolonged challenges arising from the pandemic, not only to preserve individual quality of life, but to sustain the effectiveness of medical services in a new post-pandemic scenario. In conclusion, the studies reinforce the complexity of these challenges, calling for measures to support the mental health of healthcare professionals in the post-pandemic scenario, recognising and addressing the lasting effects of the challenging experiences faced during and after the crisis.

**Key Word:** Emotional exhaustion; burnout; depression; health professionals; post-pandemic.

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### I. Introduction

The post-pandemic context has emerged as a period of reflection and reconstruction in various spheres of society, especially in the work of health professionals. This is because, throughout the COVID-19 crisis, these professionals have faced a stressful work routine. The urgency of responding to the demand for infected people, the constant exposure to traumatic situations and the experience of significant losses culminated in a professional environment marked by emotional exhaustion, generating impacts that reverberated beyond the physical domain (RODRIGUES; 2023).

Thus, the emotional after-effects of the pandemic, coupled with the necessary adaptations in the health system, have prolonged the psychological tension experienced by health professionals. The assimilation of

changes, continuous pressure and uncertainty about the professional and epidemiological future have contributed to an environment conducive to the development of depressive conditions (PALHETA; ANDRADE, 2022).

In this scenario, emotional exhaustion and depression stand out as interconnected phenomena of great relevance for understanding and addressing the mental health of these professionals. Emotional exhaustion, characterized by deep and emotional fatigue resulting from the intense demands of the work environment, is a potential precursor to the manifestation of depressive symptoms. Constant exposure to traumatic events, emotional overload and the pressure to meet expectations exacerbate the vulnerability of these professionals, making them susceptible to more complex mental health conditions (COELHO; OLIVEIRA, 2022).

Beyond the individual challenge, emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals have direct implications for the effectiveness of the health system as a whole. The quality of care provided, interaction with patients and decision-making capacity are influenced by the mental health of these professionals (RODRIGUES, 2023). Therefore, an in-depth understanding of these phenomena not only aims to preserve individual well-being, but also to safeguard the integrity of the health system, which is essential for the proper functioning of society.

Given this context, this study aimed to analyze the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context. By understanding the prevalence and factors associated with emotional exhaustion and depression, it is hoped that the results will provide theoretical and practical support to help build policies and practices that promote a healthy and resilient work environment in the post-pandemic scenario.

## **II. Material And Methods**

### **Type of research**

This research takes on the configuration of a systematic review as it seeks to analyze the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context. In line with Brizola and Fantin's (2016) methodological guidelines for conducting systematic reviews, this approach is pertinent when seeking an impartial and organized synthesis of the available literature on the topic in question.

Authors such as Donato and Donato (2019) emphasize the contribution of systematic reviews in areas with a significant volume of studies, providing a critical and structured analysis of existing evidence, essential elements for understanding the implications of emotional exhaustion and depression among healthcare professionals.

In this study, the systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, thus ensuring a rigorous and transparent method for selecting and analyzing the included studies. Adopting these guidelines provided a standardized structure for conducting and presenting the results, ensuring transparency and replicability of the process, as recommended by Galvão and Ricarte (2019).

The adoption of the PRISMA guidelines provided a comprehensive and organized analysis of the literature, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context, contributing to theoretical grounding and decision-making based on scientific evidence.

### **Search platforms and surveys**

Within the scope of this research, the careful choice of search platforms aims to ensure a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the literature related to the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context. The platforms selected for this survey were Scielo and Google Scholar, recognised for their breadth and relevance in indexing a wide range of scientific articles.

The search process was conducted using keywords strategically chosen to reflect the core aspects of the research. Terms such as "emotional exhaustion", "burnout", "depression", "health professionals" and "post-pandemic" were used to ensure the breadth and specificity needed to identify relevant studies. These keywords were used in combination with Boolean operators AND and OR, allowing for a refined and precise search, which is essential for selecting studies that directly address the proposed theme.

The use of Boolean operators such as AND and OR during the search was an essential strategy. These operators allowed the keywords to be combined effectively, ensuring that the results included studies that address both emotional exhaustion and depression related to health professionals in the post-pandemic period. This methodological approach aims to provide a comprehensive and accurate overview of the current state of research on the subject, contributing to the robustness and reliability of the results obtained.

### **Inclusion criteria**

The careful definition of inclusion criteria is fundamental to guaranteeing the relevance and quality of the studies selected in this research on the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context.

In line with the scope of the research, specific criteria were established for the inclusion of articles. Firstly, it was decided to focus exclusively on Brazilian studies. This geographical delimitation seeks to offer a contextualized and specific analysis of the conditions faced by health professionals in Brazil, taking into account the nuances and particularities of the country's health system.

In addition, the timing of the articles was strategically defined, including only studies published between 2022 and 2023. This interval covers the final period of the pandemic, providing an up-to-date view of the trends and challenges faced by health professionals in the post-pandemic context.

The topic was another crucial inclusion criterion. Only articles directly associated with emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals were considered. This specificity aimed to ensure that the selected studies were aligned with the central objective of the research, offering an in-depth and relevant analysis of the prevalence of these phenomena in the Brazilian post-pandemic scenario.

The decision to include only scientific articles contributes to methodological soundness, prioritizing academic research with rigorous methods. This choice aims to guarantee the depth and reliability of the contributions considered, which are fundamental for a consistent analysis of the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic period.

### **Exclusion criteria**

The careful definition of exclusion criteria is essential to maintain the cohesion and quality of this research, which aims to analyze the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context.

Firstly, theses, dissertations, monographs and other academic formats were excluded, concentrating exclusively on analyzing specific scientific articles published in scientific journals and magazines. This decision helps to maintain uniformity in the methodological approach, prioritizing the analysis of studies that meet rigorous academic standards.

Another measure of exclusion was the choice of articles from other nationalities. The research will focus exclusively on studies of Brazilian nationality, seeking to provide a more contextualized and specific analysis of the conditions faced by health professionals in Brazil in the post-pandemic period.

In addition, articles that were not directly associated with the central theme of the research were excluded. This approach ensures that the selected studies are aligned with the specific scope of the research, avoiding deviations in focus that could jeopardize the relevance and consistency of the results.

The exclusion of duplicate articles reinforces the integrity of the review process, ensuring that each study is considered only once. This measure contributes to the efficiency and quality of the review, avoiding redundancies and keeping the focus on analyzing unique contributions to the understanding of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals after the pandemic.

### **Analyzing the data**

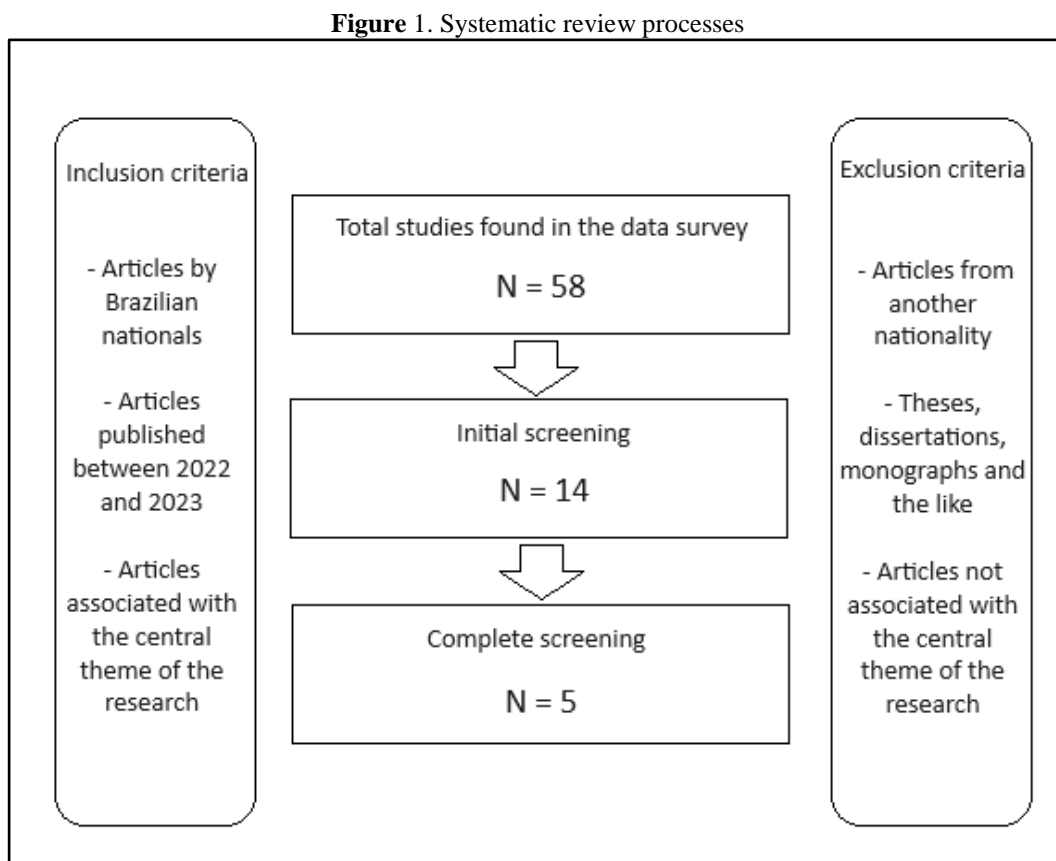
The process of analyzing the data in this research was structured into two distinct screening phases, aimed at ensuring a careful selection of the studies to be included in the systematic review: the initial screening and the full screening.

The initial screening phase consisted of reading the abstracts and titles, as well as analyzing where the articles were published. This stage aimed to carry out a preliminary assessment to identify studies aligned with the established inclusion criteria. Reading the abstracts and titles was crucial to determining thematic relevance, while analyzing the publication sites made it possible to discard studies that were not published in scientific journals, while maintaining quality and uniformity in the methodological approach.

After the initial screening, the selected studies underwent a thorough analysis. At this stage, each article was examined in detail to assess its adherence to the inclusion criteria and to extract pertinent information. The analysis included a review of the methods used, results achieved, discussions presented and conclusions reached. This more in-depth process allowed for a more complete understanding of the conditions of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context, considering the specific context of the research.

These screening phases were implemented in a systematic and judicious manner to ensure consistency and quality in the selection of studies. The sequential approach, starting with an initial screening based on abstracts and titles, followed by a thorough analysis of the articles, contributed to a robust and comprehensive systematic review. This methodology ensured the reliability of the results presented, strengthening the validity and relevance of research into emotional exhaustion and depression in healthcare professionals in the post-pandemic context.

Figure 1 illustrates all the procedures adopted to carry out this systematic review.



Source: Research data (2023).

After thorough screening, the information from the selected articles was summarized in a spreadsheet, containing the authors' names, research objectives, methodology and main conclusions.

### III. Result and discussions

After surveying the articles, a sample of five was obtained, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Articles selected in the systematic review

Authors	Objective	Methodology	Research conclusions
Diaz et al. (2022)	Analyzing the mental health of the professionals who worked on the front line during the period from the start of the first recorded cases to the time when social interaction was relaxed.	Cross-sectional study	The study analyzed the mental health of health professionals during and after the pandemic, identifying stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety and insomnia as the predominant symptoms. The survey, conducted using questionnaires, highlighted the diversity of the group, which was mostly female and highly educated. The work environment was crucial for mental health, indicating that favorable conditions contributed to mitigating overload. Increased stress related to the pandemic was associated with work pressures, increased workload and fear of infection. The pandemic has also affected the provision of health services, impacting on the speed and quality of care. The study concludes that government and corporate actions are needed to support emotionally affected healthcare workers, preventing future mental disorders such as depression. These measures are crucial not only for individual health, but also for maintaining the quality of health services.

Sales (2023)	To analyze the factors linked to mental and physical changes among nursing professionals in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.	Integrative review	The studies revealed that nursing professionals face persistent impacts on both their mental and physical health. These manifestations have persisted in the post-pandemic scenario, and the consequences identified include mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and burnout syndrome, as well as physical manifestations such as alopecia, skin rashes and gastrointestinal problems such as nervous gastritis and migraine attacks. These effects are attributed to the intense experiences lived on the front line fighting SARS-COV-2, aggravated by the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), high mortality rate, family absence and social isolation.
Pedro et al. (2022)	To describe Burnout Syndrome in its epidemiological aspects, triggers and consequences in the intensive care population in the pre- and post-pandemic scenario.	Narrative literature review	The physical and mental exhaustion associated with the occupation is prominent in the medical profession, and Burnout syndrome is a worrying upward trend among these professionals. Studies indicate a variety of factors related to the development of burnout and the labor insufficiency characteristic of Burnout, with an emphasis on work dynamics, environment and interaction with the patient. This syndrome is more prevalent in some specialties, especially intensive care medicine, where the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the challenges faced by these professionals. Exhausting working hours, constantly facing the suffering of patients and their families, as well as living with death, have been aggravated by uncertainty, overload and powerlessness, significantly impacting intensivists who have worked on the front line against the disease. Among the negative repercussions of Burnout, we highlight not only the reduction in the quality of life of the professional, but also its consequences reflected in the worsening of the doctor-patient relationship and the poor provision of medical care.
Crispim et al. (2023)	Verifying the impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of healthcare professionals in the post-pandemic scenario	Integrative review	Health professionals on the front line faced stressful situations, resulting in a significant increase in levels of worry, anxiety and depression. The intense workload, the large number of cases and psychological exhaustion, combined with the lack of protective equipment, contributed to the difficulties faced by these professionals. The integrative review highlights that, after facing the pandemic, these professionals were more likely to develop psychological problems, including depression and physical exhaustion, manifesting symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia and the fear of posing a danger to their families. The post-pandemic scenario reveals the prevalence of these challenges, highlighting the need for support and attention to the mental health of these professionals.
Robazzi, Rocha and Marziale (2023)	Analyzing the perspectives of nursing practice in post-pandemic scenarios	Critical literature	In the post-pandemic scenario, nursing professionals face significant challenges related to emotional exhaustion and depression. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these professionals were essential on the front line, facing overload and risks, which resulted in a high number of illnesses and deaths among them. Analysis of the deaths reveals that vulnerability was related to work overload, job insecurity and difficulty in accessing personal protective equipment. The profile of the deceased highlighted middle-level and black workers as the most affected.

**Source:** Research data (2023).

After the systematic review, it was possible to observe the prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depression among health professionals in the post-pandemic context. The study by Diaz et al. (202) carried out a comprehensive analysis of the mental health of healthcare workers, both during and after the pandemic. It found that symptoms such as stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety and insomnia were prevalent in this group during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The methodological approach used in the research was based on questionnaires, revealing the diversity of the group studied, which stood out for being mostly made up of female professionals with a high level of education.

A crucial point highlighted in the study was the impact of the work environment on the mental health of these professionals. Favorable working conditions were shown to be relevant in mitigating the emotional burden faced during and after the pandemic. This finding suggests that specific measures to improve working conditions can play a significant role in promoting the mental health of these professionals.

With regard to factors related to increased stress during and after the pandemic, the study identified work pressures, increased workload and fear of infection as associated elements. These results highlight the need to consider not only professional aspects, but also personal and safety factors that directly influence the mental health of these professionals.

In addition, the research highlighted that the pandemic has had significant impacts on the provision of health services, affecting both the speed and quality of care. This finding highlights the interconnection between the mental health of healthcare professionals and the effectiveness of the healthcare system as a whole.

In conclusion, the study emphasized the urgent need for government and corporate action to offer emotional support to health professionals who were affected during this period. Preventing future mental disorders, such as depression, becomes a priority, not only for the individual well-being of these professionals, but also to guarantee the maintenance of the quality of health services, which is fundamental for society as a whole.

According to Sales (2023), nursing professionals continue to face persistent impacts on their mental and physical health even after the pandemic has ended. The post-pandemic scenario reveals that the consequences for these professionals extend to mental disorders, including anxiety, depression and burnout syndrome. In addition, physical manifestations such as alopecia, skin rashes and gastrointestinal problems such as nervous gastritis and migraine attacks persist, indicating a lasting burden.

These adverse effects are attributed to the intense experiences of nursing professionals while they were on the front line fighting SARS-COV-2. The shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) during the pandemic is highlighted as an aggravating factor, exposing these professionals to significant risks. In addition, the high mortality rate, family absence due to social isolation measures and intense emotional overload contribute to the persistence of these negative impacts on the health of professionals.

The complexity of these challenges indicates the need for comprehensive measures to address both the mental and physical aspects of nursing professionals' well-being. Implementing effective strategies for emotional support, improving working conditions, providing adequate access to PPE and promoting a healthy working environment are crucial aspects to consider in order to mitigate the long-term adverse effects faced by these professionals.

In the post-pandemic scenario, Pedro et al. (2022) reiterates that the challenges related to physical and mental exhaustion among health professionals, especially in the medical profession, emerge as a persistent concern. Burnout syndrome, which is already on the rise, is a marked reality among these professionals, revealing a series of factors interconnected to its development, especially work dynamics, the professional environment and complex interactions with patients.

Specifically, medical specialties, such as intensive care medicine, continue to face the prolonged impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, amplifying the challenges these professionals were already facing. Burnout, the result of exhausting working hours, constant exposure to the suffering of patients and their families, as well as facing death on a daily basis, is compounded by persistent uncertainty, overload and a sense of powerlessness.

In the post-pandemic context, it is clear that intensivists, playing a crucial role on the front line against the disease, continue to deal with the negative repercussions of burnout. These repercussions are not limited to a reduction in the quality of life of these professionals, but extend to the deterioration of doctor-patient relationships and the sub-optimal delivery of medical care. Attention to the mental health of these professionals thus becomes vital not only to preserve individual well-being, but also to guarantee the effectiveness and sustainable quality of medical services in the post-pandemic period. Tackling these issues takes on even greater urgency given the need for a resilient medical practice that can adapt to the demands of the new scenario.

Crispim et al. (2023) emphasize that health professionals who were on the front line faced extremely stressful situations, which resulted in a significant increase in levels of worry, anxiety and depression. The intense workload, the large number of cases and psychological exhaustion, compounded by the lack of adequate protective equipment, contributed substantially to the difficulties faced by these dedicated professionals during the pandemic.

The authors point out that even after the pandemic is over, these professionals continue to show a greater propensity to develop psychological problems, including depression and physical exhaustion. Symptoms such as persistent anxiety, insomnia and the fear of representing a danger to their own families become manifest in this post-pandemic scenario. This finding highlights the depth and durability of the psychological impact of these challenging experiences.

The post-pandemic scenario undeniably reveals the continued prevalence of these mental health challenges among healthcare workers. This highlights the pressing need to implement comprehensive mental health care and support measures for these professionals. Recognising and addressing the lasting effects of these challenging experiences is crucial to promoting the recovery and resilience of these professionals, ensuring that they receive the support they need to overcome the adverse impacts of their remarkable work during and after the pandemic.

From the perspective of Robazzi, Rocha and Marziale (2023), in the post-pandemic scenario, health professionals, especially nurses, continue to face significant challenges, especially related to emotional exhaustion and depression. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these professionals played a crucial role on the

front line, facing work overload and substantial risks, which resulted in an alarming number of cases of illness and deaths among them.

Analysis of the deaths of nursing professionals reveals that vulnerability was closely linked to work overload, precarious working conditions and difficulty in accessing personal protective equipment in the early stages of the pandemic. The profile of the deceased highlights a trend in which mid-level workers (assistants and technicians) and black individuals were the most affected, showing significant disparities in the impacts of this crisis on the nursing workforce.

These challenges persist in the post-pandemic scenario, requiring continued attention to support the mental and emotional health of these professionals. It is imperative that measures are implemented to mitigate these impacts, including psychological support strategies, facilitated access to mental health resources and the promotion of work environments that prioritize the well-being of these essential professionals. Understanding specific vulnerabilities, such as ethnic and educational disparity, is key to targeting effective and equitable interventions.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Through this systematic review, it is clear that emotional exhaustion and depression are persistent challenges that continue to significantly impact healthcare workers in the post-pandemic scenario. The studies reviewed reveal a variety of psychological and physical symptoms, reflecting the intensity of the experiences lived during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The work environment emerges as a crucial factor, demonstrating that favorable conditions play a significant role in mitigating emotional overload. The impacts on the provision of health services, evidenced by reduced agility and quality of care, highlight the interconnection between the mental health of health professionals and the effectiveness of the health system as a whole. The complexity of these challenges transcends the professional sphere, reaching personal and safety aspects, such as work pressures, increased workload and the fear of infection.

The urgency of government and corporate action to offer emotional support is evident in the need to prevent future mental disorders such as depression. Commitment to promoting the mental health of these professionals is not just a matter of individual wellbeing, but is essential to ensuring that the quality of health services is maintained, which is fundamental for society as a whole.

In this scenario, the specificities faced by health professionals, especially nurses, highlight the persistence of both mental and physical challenges in the post-pandemic scenario. The scarcity of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the high mortality rate and family absence during social isolation contribute to a lasting burden. Effective strategies for emotional support, improving working conditions and promoting healthy environments are crucial to mitigating the long-term adverse impacts.

In the medical profession, the worrying rise of burnout syndrome, especially in intensive care medicine, reveals the need to face up to the prolonged challenges arising from the pandemic. Attention to the mental health of these professionals is not just a matter of individual quality of life, but is vital to preserving the doctor-patient relationship and ensuring the sustainable effectiveness of medical services in the new post-pandemic scenario.

The studies reinforce that health professionals continue to face extremely stressful situations, manifesting themselves in persistent levels of worry, anxiety and depression. The complexity of these challenges calls for comprehensive measures to support and care for the mental health of these professionals, recognising the lasting effects of the challenging experiences during and after the pandemic.

To summarize, the conclusion unifies the findings of the studies, highlighting the pressing need for effective strategies and specific measures to address the mental health impacts of healthcare workers in the post-pandemic scenario. A commitment to the well-being of these professionals is not only an ethical responsibility, but is fundamental to ensuring the sustainability and continued effectiveness of health services in a new post-crisis reality.

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