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The mental health situation of university students - How to make their academic experience healthy and safe.

> *"If I commit suicide, it will not be to destroy myself but to put myself back together again."*
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> Antonin Artaud, *Jack Hirschman* (1963).

More than 80% of university students in Brazil suffer from mental health problems, according to Andifes (Associação Nacional dos Dirigentes das Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior no Brasil). It is alarming that many of those cases turn out to a drastic conclusion, the suicide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) suicide is one of the main causes of death around the world, mainly among the young people, from 15 to 29 years old. So, when Autonin says the phrase quoted at the beginning of this text, he may as well be talking about the situation those students around the world are facing. The feelings of hopelessness, loss, depression and anxiety, that lead them to a path of mental health problems and even worse consequences, such as taking their own life. Understanding the reasons why they are going through these issues is the key to come up with solutions and avoid a fatal end for our young ones. This is what this essay is about to do.

In 2021, after a difficult pandemic year, the *Pró-Reitoria de Inclusão e Pertencimento* (PRIP), an organization from *Universidade de São Paulo*, conducted a survey with the graduation students. It was found that almost half of the USP community was not mentally healthy. Part of those results are a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many had lost their loved ones and lived in reclusion and fear for several months. However, this situation is

nothing new, the decline of the mental health quality in universities can be seen even before the last decade. The lack of job opportunities, the frustrations of academic life, the deficiency of support from their colleges and universities and also struggling with balancing the demands of their lives. These are the main reasons that lead students to that dangerous outcome. Moreover, the university experience itself contributes to the damage in students' minds and souls. The competitive and stressful environment of academic life causes anxiety and the feeling of not belonging. Most of the time leading to depression and a sense of not being enough. Research made by The Healthy Minds Network and American College Health Association (2022) reveal that in the last 6 years the anxiety levels of university students increased from 17% to 31%.

As the educational institutions are not effectively helping nor presenting affordable and possible solutions for this mental health crisis, students themselves can and should gather forces to help their own group and fight for their own right of living. For instance, in some colleges around the world, academic groups that are more politically active in their universities, created groups for help and support. That is how ECOS came to life. A project created by healthcare professionals and undergraduate students from USP. It has a space for providing assistance in the Butantã campus, where the crew of ECOS listen and give emotional support for the USP community. The program is not for emergencies, but is already a good step in the path for a better mental health environment in universities. Taking the problem in their own hands and coming up with solutions is one of the ways to soften the situation.

Another possibility is bringing awareness to it. As mental health is also a private issue of each student, making them understand they have to prioritize their own body and minds is also the best solution. Campaigns that demonstrate the damages caused by a life focused only in academical and work activities can be a good beginning. But, promoting a self-care

environment is the answer. Students should fight for having better school schedules. To have breaks, access to healthy food and physical activities in their campus. Having a space for napping, reading, playing games and just relaxing from the routine may also help. Remembering that having fun and keeping their body and mind healthy is the way for a good academic development.

Nevertheless, the fact that those who are suffering and experiencing hopeless and depressive feelings are the students themselves, makes it really difficult for them to come up with those solutions and provide help for their own academic community. As they are the ones who need help themselves. Therefore, the best thing to do is resort to the institution itself, the university. Organizing strikes, marches and making the poor situation of their mental health something public may be the answer for conquering what they need and deserve for a better and healthy academic experience. When being pressed and charged for the responsibility to provide a safe environment for their students, the colleges may then take actions to solve the problem, or at least reduce those statistics.

In sum, the mental health issue is to be taken seriously. Universities are neglecting the well-being of their own students, leading to a rise of mental illnesses and suicide. Fighting for their own lives became the duty of the students themselves. Creating support among their own communities and caring for their own health are the weapons to fight this cause. But also demand from their institutions an action and solutions are also the same students 'duty. Remember, as hard as life and college might be, it is totally okay to not be okay sometimes, but do never give up on yourself, as you are the most precious thing you can ever have.

> *"Your present circumstances don't determine where you go; they merely determine where you start."*
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> (Nido Qubein)

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