

# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for University Students: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

This study aimed to explore undergraduate students' perception of their participation in an intervention based on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), to reduce psychological inflexibility (PI) and stress in undergraduate students. Twenty-one students from different undergraduate programs participated in the research, with an average age of  $23.4 \pm 5.61$ , of whom 71.4% were female and 28.6% were male. The data collected in the interviews were submitted to content analysis and organized into four categories: experience in the program, utility, feasibility, and ACT suggestions and processes. The results made it possible to identify that the program was a positive experience for the participants, the intervention was useful and feasible and enabled students to develop the requirements to better deal with the adversities of daily life without departing from their personal values.

**Keywords:** intervention, university students, student health, stress, acceptance and commitment therapy

### TERAPIA DE ACEITAÇÃO E COMPROMISSO PARA REDUÇÃO DO ESTRESSE EM UNIVERSITÁRIOS: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO

#### Resumo

Este estudo teve como objetivo explorar a percepção de alunos de graduação em relação à sua participação em uma intervenção baseada na terapia de aceitação e compromisso (*acceptance and commitment therapy* [ACT]), para redução da inflexibilidade psicológica (IP) e do estresse em estudantes universitários. Participaram da pesquisa 21 alunos, de diferentes cursos de graduação, com idade média de  $23,4 \pm 5,61$ , sendo 71,4% do sexo feminino e 28,6% do sexo masculino. Os dados coletados nas entrevistas foram submetidos à análise de conteúdo e organizados em quatro categorias: experiência no programa, utilidade, viabilidade e sugestões e processos da ACT. Os resultados possibilitaram identificar que o programa foi uma experiência positiva para os participantes. Além disso, constatou-se que a intervenção foi útil e viável e possibilitou que os estudantes desenvolvessem as habilidades necessárias para lidar melhor com as adversidades do dia a dia, sem que precisassem se afastar dos seus valores pessoais.

**Palavras-chave:** intervenção, estudantes universitários, saúde do estudante, estresse, terapia de aceitação e compromisso

### TERAPIA DE ACEPTACIÓN Y COMPROMISO PARA ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS: UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO

#### Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar la percepción de los estudiantes de pregrado sobre su participación en una intervención, basada en la terapia de aceptación y compromiso (*acceptance and commitment therapy* [ACT]), para reducir la inflexibilidad psicológica (IP) y el estrés en los estudiantes de pregrado. En la investigación participaron 21 estudiantes de diferentes carreras, con una edad promedio de  $23,4 \pm 5,61$ , de los cuales el 71,4% eran mujeres y el 28,6% hombres. Los datos recolectados en las entrevistas fueron sometidos a análisis de contenido y organizados en cuatro categorías: experiencia en el programa, utilidad, factibilidad y sugerencias y procesos de ACT. Los resultados permitieron identificar que el programa fue una experiencia positiva para los participantes, la intervención fue útil y factible y permitió a los estudiantes desarrollar los requisitos necesarios para enfrentar mejor las adversidades de la vida diaria, sin apartarse de sus valores personales.

**Palabras clave:** intervención, estudiantes universitarios, salud del estudiante, estrés, terapia de aceptación y compromiso

University admission is a step marked by many changes in the lives of students. These transformations take place in different areas, such as in the academic, social, personal, institutional, and vocational dimensions (Baptista et al., 2020). Although it may be a positive and growing experience, graduation can also be a source of great suffering. Studies suggest greater vulnerability to the development of psychiatric disorders during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, i.e., the time when the majority of the population starts a higher education program (Leppink et al., 2016).

In addition, several aspects contribute to the psychic suffering of university students, such as academic performance and rigor, school workload, financial problems, changes in social support and life situations, and low balance between work, study, and other areas (Leppink et al., 2016; Dachew et al., 2015). Recent studies show a high prevalence of symptoms of depression, stress, and anxiety among university students, highlighting the urgent need for preventive, low-cost actions that promote care and emotional support in higher education institutions (Edwards et al., 2019; Maia & Dias, 2020).

Research has shown that, in order to treat the students' mental health, most services inserted in universities use an individual treatment model, not focusing on preventive work, which means they have limited resources to assist this population (Conley et al., 2013). In addition, there are personal, social, and cultural reasons that may lead students to hesitate to seek help because, despite the clear need and high demand, the search for support remains very low, and this may be related to the stigma linked to mental health among this population (Edwards et al., 2019; Conley et al., 2013).

Preventive and group interventions are ideas for the university environment since they increase the probability of students seeking help by observing their colleagues doing the same. Thus, the mental health services provided by the institution could reach a wider audience (Conley et al., 2013). In addition, they can be useful in reducing perceived stress, assisting in coping with stressors, and improving academic performance (Leppink et al., 2016).

Studies show that approaches based on mindfulness and acceptance, such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes et al., 2011), have shown promising results in interventions with university students, especially in relation to stress reduction, anxiety, and depression (Pistorello et al., 2013; Chiodelli et al., 2018; Azevedo & Menezes, 2020). These interventions also promote greater personal well-being and better academic involvement (Edwards et al., 2019; Grégoire et al., 2018; Paliliunas et al., 2018).

ACT is a contextual cognitive-behavioral approach developed in the 1980s by Steven C. Hayes and colleagues, and its main objective is to promote psychological flexibility (PF). PF refers to the ability to fully contact the present moment and, based on what the situation offers, change behaviors or persist in them to serve the chosen values (Hayes et al., 2011).

According to Hayes et al. (2011), PF comprises six processes: acceptance, cognitive defusion, contextual self, contact with the present moment, clarity of values, and commitment actions. Acceptance refers to a gentle openness to experiences, with a non-judgmental stance

and without the intention of modifying them. Cognitive defusion is a process of understanding that the person is not their thoughts or what their mind says they are. Individuals are encouraged to actively observe the flow of thoughts, understanding that they are not absolute truths (Luoma et al., 2007). The contextual self is based on the understanding that there is a continuous and stable part of the individual who has been and will be present in all situations experienced. It is the “place” from which the individual can observe what occurs in their life and gain perspective (Luoma et al., 2007). Contact with the present moment relates to the ability to constantly keep in touch with what is happening here and now. For such, one can use some techniques or structured exercises – as well as mindfulness (Hayes et al., 2011). Values are the elements that give meaning to life. They make it possible to live meaningful lives that match our goals (Hayes & Smith, 2005). Furthermore, the commitment actions are those taken by the individual that are connected to the values and that make it possible to put them into practice. These six processes of PF are predictors of mental health (Hayes et al., 2011).

The psychopathology model of the ACT is represented by psychological inflexibility (PI), characterized by a pattern of avoidance of negative experiences or control of feelings and thoughts instead of actions based on values of life (Hayes et al., 2006). PI is also composed of six main processes, which are basically the inverse of the processes that make up PF: experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, attachment to the conceptual self, predominant attention to the past or future, lack of clarity of values, inaction, impulsivity, and persistence of avoidance. Experiential avoidance refers to the attempt to avoid emotions, feelings, and uncomfortable sensations, which often causes individuals to distance themselves from their values (Hayes & Smith, 2005). Cognitive fusion refers to being stuck in the content of thoughts, having them as unquestionable truths (Luoma et al., 2007). Conceptual self refers to assigning oneself descriptions or judgments, which are often taken as static, as if they could not be modified (Hayes et al., 2011). Predominant attention to the past or future is the process of distancing oneself from the present moment, that is, when attention remains attached to past events or predictions of the future. Thus, there is a disconnection from what is being experienced here and now, which can impair the identification of the needs, feelings, and thoughts associated with the present moment (Luoma et al., 2007). The lack of clarity of values is a process in which personal values are not clear, making it more difficult to identify what is relevant to individuals and develop a behavioral repertoire that directs them to a meaningful life (Luoma et al., 2007). Finally, inaction, impulsivity, and persistence of avoidance refer to the fact that individuals cannot act effectively, according to what is relevant to them, insisting in behaviors that distance them from a valued direction (Luoma et al., 2007).

Thus, considering the relevance of ACT for mental health promotion in university students, the aim of this study was to explore the perception of undergraduate students of the experience and impact of an intervention based on ACT to reduce PI and stress in university students.

**Method**

**Participants**

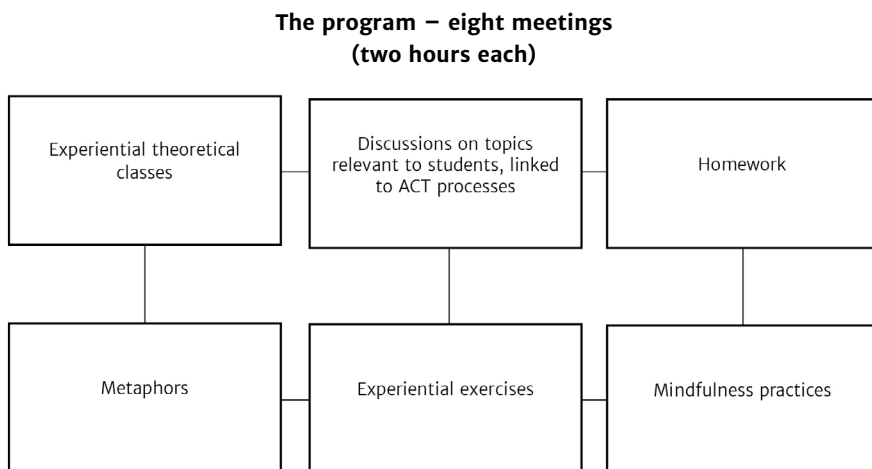
The study included 21 students from different undergraduate programs, with a mean age of 23.4 ± 5.61, of whom 71.4% were female and 28.6% were male. The intervention was carried out in 2019 in person and in a group.

**Data collection and analysis procedure**

The program was called Group for Stress Reduction in University Students. It was based on ACT and consisted of weekly meetings, lasting two hours each, for two months. Through mindfulness and acceptance techniques, we sought to promote PF and reduce stress. It was held in workshop format, composed of theoretical and experiential classes, in the model of an undergraduate course. The protocol used was based on the book *Get out of your mind and into your life* (Hayes & Smith, 2005), adapted to the university context by researchers from the University of Nevada and translated and adapted to the Brazilian context by the researchers involved in this project. The students received support material adapted from the base book. For homework, they would read a brief chapter every week, perform exercises (such as monitoring, daily records, and compromised actions) and practice mindfulness. The classes took place in the dynamics room of the Psychology program, thus providing a warm and comfortable environment. Students could sit on floor cushions or chairs. Figure 1 presents a summary of the basic structure of all sessions.

**Figure 1**

*Basic Structure of the Program*



After participating in the eight weeks of intervention, the students were interviewed individually by staff members who had not been therapists or monitors. The interviews were

conducted in a semi-structured manner, recorded, and later transcribed. The data collected in the interviews were submitted to content analysis (Bardin, 2011), involving the following steps:

- *Pre-analysis*: an initial floating reading with the predefinition of three themes related to the objectives of the study (experience in the program, usefulness, and feasibility and suggestions). Then, a theme that emerged from the analysis of the participants' statements was added (the six ACT processes).
- *Exploration of the material*: codifications and categorizations of the data were carried out from the units of record. At this stage, three independent judges performed the codifications individually. Later, the three analyses were discussed to verify the compatibilities and incompatibilities in each category, to form a single table of results.
- *Treatment of the results obtained, inference, and interpretation*: this stage was performed seeking to explore the effects of the intervention based on the student's perception of the experience of participation in the program. We sought to identify the feasibility of an intervention in this format, suggestions for future studies, the usefulness in students' lives, and manifestations of the development of PF through ACT processes.

### **Interview**

Elaborated by the researchers, the interview aimed to explore the individual's experience of participation in the program concerning their satisfaction, feasibility, and suggestions. The following questions were used:

- 1) We would like you to tell us a little bit about how your experience participating in the program.
- 2) Would you recommend the program to colleagues or participate again on another occasion? Why?
- 3) Compared to previous semesters (if you have already attended), do you think this semester was different in how you handled academic problems? If so, in what way?
- 4) Do you feel that you have managed to put into practice what you have learned from this program?
- 5) Was there anything you liked the most or found more useful to you? And was there something you did not like or considered irrelevant?
- 6) What suggestions would you give to the program?
- 7) Do you consider it feasible to include this subject in the academic curriculum? Why?

## Ethical procedures

The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (*Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul* [PUCRS]) – Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Appreciation (*Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* [Caae]) No. 01469618.1.0000.5336 – and meets Resolution No. 510/2016, referring to research with human beings. Participants signed a Free and Informed Consent Form agreeing to participate in the study. In the consent form, the students authorized the audio recording of the interviews since it was made clear that their identities would be preserved and that they could give up participating at any time without any prejudice.

## Results

The four categories analyzed were color-coded: category 1 (group experience, blue), category 2 (program utility, yellow), category 3 (viability and suggestions, orange), and category 4 (ACT processes, green). Registration units were extracted from the participants' statements, characterized by the main information contained in the statements and the full statements. These units of records were highlighted throughout the text (from the transcribed interviews) with the characteristic color of each category. Subsequently, they were described in a large table containing all possible records until the saturation of the data. Table 1 shows an overview of the categories and their respective units of record. Then, these data will be discussed and complemented with some full statements.

**Table 1**

*Synthesis of Qualitative Analyses Through Categorizations and Registration Units*

Category	Subcategory	Registration units
Group experience	Individual experience	It was something objective. Very good. Interesting. Positive experience. It arose at a necessary time. Very important. Would indicate to other people. Would participate again. Experience that goes beyond the academic. Taboo break.
	Collective experience	Perception of other people. Other people have equivalent problems. Bonding. Reception. Identification with colleagues. Reduction of the feeling of loneliness.

**Table 1***Synthesis of Qualitative Analyses Through Categorizations and Registration Units*

Category	Subcategory	Registration units
Program utility	-	Learn how to deal better with stress. Stay calmer. Application outside the university context (with friends and family). Improvement in academic performance. More self-care. Less perfectionism. Application of metaphors in everyday life. Deal better with thoughts. Relate better to people, including family. Develop better in personal aspects.
Feasibility and suggestions	Viability	Very feasible. Format and number of people per group were feasible. Intervention is necessary and of vital importance. It is important to have a course to work on stress during university.
	Suggestions	Bring as an elective course of the university. It is suggested to have more dissemination. It is suggested that it happen from the fourth semester onwards. Viable as an extracurricular activity.
ACT processes	Mindfulness	Interest in meditation practices. Mindfulness makes a difference in routine. Observe the situation one finds oneself in.
	Cognitive defusion	Thinking of thoughts as thoughts. I am not my stress or my anxiety. Being able to deal better with emotions. Do not believe in the labels of situations. See the situation as it is and not how emotions make you think it is.
	Acceptance/kind disposition	Learn to suffer. Welcome negative emotions. Accept the situation one finds oneself in and learn to deal with it.
	Self-compassion	Welcome negative emotions. Understand that sometimes we need to respect that we are not well. Respect moments of suffering.
	Committed action	Have future plans. Learn to get around negative situations. Get out of the comfort zone. Get closer to something that makes sense.
	Values	Greater clarity of values.

Regarding the *experience in the group*, all participants mentioned positive aspects of it. Many reported that they felt welcomed and identified with their colleagues, which, in a way, made them not feel so alone and broke a taboo about seeking psychological help. The following excerpts demonstrate these aspects:

It was a very positive experience in the sense that the group... the opportunity appeared at the moment I needed it the most... and I thought it was a very strong self-knowledge experience. I was feeling very bad, really bad, you know, and to be able to deal with it and see that other people were also on my side, it was



not something that was the end of the world for me because other people had those same fears, those same problems, and we created that bond there every week, so, and I was discovering myself too, so... wow, it was very important to me. (Law student, 25 years old)

First, it was a taboo break for me because I never imagined I would seek any psychological assistance. I thought this was for troubled people and... so it was good because, from the first two meetings, I already knew that I needed that. (Chemical Engineering student, 22 years old)

In addition, the students reported that they would participate again, recommend or had already recommended to other people and that the group got together when they were in great need due to issues related to the university. Some students also stated that the approach was quite objective and more effective than individual therapy for their needs at that time but not excluding the possibility of seeking professional help.

Regarding the *usefulness of the program*, some participants reported that the experience had a reach beyond university-related issues, such as how to deal with life, in general, and in the relationship with family members and others off-campus. In addition, it was also possible to perceive in the statements the practice of self-care, as in the excerpts highlighted below:

But I think, in a way, coming here helped me with a lot of things like that, I think, a lot more, maybe outside the university environment, which is... a little contradictory, because the... the group is for... for the university environment, for university students. (Audiovisual Production and Cinema student, 25 years old)

And usually, when I used to get too stressed, I ended up getting sick and things like that, so now I'm trying to take more care of myself, and my health, and, yes, I see improvements. (Food Engineering student, 21 years old)

One of the participants said she was much calmer to take the semester exams, so that she got better grades than in the previous ones. In addition, the same student stated that she intended to drop out of the program in which she was enrolled at university. However, after the group meetings started, she learned to better deal with emotions and academic activities and was able to continue in college, as expressed in her statement below:

I'm much calmer now. I was in despair, like, I wanted to drop out of my program. I could not take it anymore, I was about to explode, and then, it took me a while to come to grips with everything we learned in the group, but after a little over a month I was already much calmer. I was already learning to deal much better with my emotions and, my ... the end of the semester was a thousand times better than the beginning, you know, and usually it's the other way around because I was much calmer. I panic over tests, and in the first tests I could not do well, and after I went in the group, like, I improved a lot, you know, in the tests, I was much calmer, I did not fall into despair, I didn't start throwing up because I was nervous, so it was really good. (Architecture student, 19 years old)

Still, concerning the usefulness of the program, the participants cited some techniques as useful in daily life, such as mindfulness and metaphors practices. The following line exemplifies this point:

It was a different approach. I was able to put it into practice. Especially mindfulness practices are making a lot of difference because I was very dispersed, and I can balance myself better when I take time for myself, take a deep breath, control, and take care of my body. So all of this is helping me, they are support mechanisms. The metaphors were very important. I think they were very representative too ... so it was very helpful. (Law student, 25 years old)

I can recognize who the passengers on my bus are and try to drive them, and sometimes, it doesn't work, sometimes it does, but when it works, I know it was because of the group, because it helped me. (Medical student, 25 years old)

Regarding the *ACT processes*, concerning PF and PI, in some students, it was possible to observe a greater expression of some specific processes, such as cognitive defusion and acceptance, present in all reports. In others, it was possible to notice the interaction of different processes. The following statements refer to the interaction between *acceptance*, *life values*, and *compromised actions*.

It also helped me learn to suffer, you know? That was something I talked about in the group too, that I thought if I had suffered, it was because I was weak; if I had cried, it was because I was weak; and when I learned to take in suffering like that, I saw that, you know? When I started crying because I couldn't get something, then this suffering was increasing: "Oh... it's because I'm dumb", "Oh... it's because I'm incapable". And then suddenly I was in a snowball of suffering, that if I had just agreed to lie down for a while and suffer because of that, I wasn't going to have created a lot of stuff in my head because I was suffering, you know? I didn't even know anymore why I was suffering because I was associating things with suffering, with sadness, and then everything was getting huge. Then with the group, I learned to suffer for the thing itself, you know, and then... "It's okay for me to suffer for it. I'm going to be here a little sad, but then life goes on". That was good. (Psychology student, 23 years old)

Experiential avoidance also appeared as procrastination of tests and assignments. The following speech demonstrated a change in how participants related to tests, to the thoughts related to them, and a behavioral change:

This semester, instead of falling into despair, like "My God, I'm not going to take the test, I'm going to take the replacement test"... before I used to give up sometimes because just thinking I had a lot to do, so like... I could reflect a little more, I saw that it wasn't a big deal, so I went there and took the tests, studied, calmed myself down, breathed, and said "Okay, no, look, I'm studying, I'm doing what I have to do". And it was okay, like that. (Civil Engineering student, 27 years old)

Some participants reported having managed to defuse their thoughts and emotions, even though they did not use the term “cognitive defusion”. In the following statement, it is possible to observe the presence of this process: “I was already learning to deal much better with my emotions... think of thoughts as thoughts, you know? Not having to, like, think I’m my own stress, so it was really good” (Architecture student, 19 years old).

The students mentioned the importance of mindfulness practices several times, stressed their usefulness and gave examples of how mindfulness made a difference in their lives. The following speech presents one of these reports and the interaction between mindfulness, defusion, and self-contextual processes.

Meditation, mainly because I think it worked very well for me. The practice of you... you sit like this and watch things and realize the situation in which you find yourself, like, seek the other me and not just the me that is seeing things happen now. Not just believe in the labels, see the whole situation as it really is and not how your emotions at that moment make you think they are. (Food Engineering student, 21 years old)

Some participants brought in their reports a greater clarity regarding their values and a greater engagement in the actions committed. It is possible to observe in these statements the interaction between values and impairment:

I feel like now I have plans for the future. Before, I limited myself and just accepted what was going wrong and continued. (Chemical Engineering student, 22 years old)

I feel what caught my attention the most within the group, in this case, was precisely that part of you accepting your situations much more and learning to get around them, and sometimes I think that was one of the factors that I will be able to take more to life. Some activities took us from our comfort zones, in which we had to do something, maybe call someone we know, talk to someone we haven't talked to in a long time. I used this technique to talk to some family members from whom I had distanced myself a little. That was really good. (Computer Engineering student, 22 years old)

Finally, in relation to the *viability of the program*, the majority of the participants signaled that they believed that it would not only be feasible to be applied as an academic course, but it would be essential. Some students signaled that the ideal would be to include it as an elective course so that only those who had interest and availability would participate. However, the majority of participants indicated that the program should be included as a mandatory course of the academic syllabus because, although many students believe that they do not need this support or that they do not have the time necessary to participate, the intervention could be beneficial to all.

I think it was going to be pretty cool because, for sure, most of the students who study at university are under a certain amount of pressure. Either at the beginning of college or for a certain period, you're going

to be pressured, that's inevitable, and often, I see the guys who end up getting out of high school and going straight to college, terrified, not knowing what's going to happen here. So, I believe that yes, several students would be interested, it would be very feasible, I think it's very nice, and it's a very cool initiative. (Computer Engineering student, 22 years old)

I believe that it is not only feasible but also necessary, especially in institutions, as there is already family pressure, but there is also academic pressure from your teachers who want excellence from you, and other people can have this perspective, I think it is extremely necessary, especially here at the university. We have a teaching of excellence and, consequently, a charge of excellence. (Law student, 25 years old)

Regarding the suggestions, some participants requested that more mindfulness practices or other group dynamics be performed during the meetings. It was also suggested that the program be more widely disseminated so that a greater number of students become aware of its occurrence, and it may even extend to students from other universities. Other topics were addressed, such as suggestions of materials about mental health to be assisted at home, using a room with a wider space, changing the time of the meetings, and bringing more examples of how to apply the topics addressed on a daily basis. Most participants indicated that they would not have suggestions for the program, as they did not identify improvement points in the format in which it was applied.

I really liked the last class, which was more of a thing with the body. So, we worked with yoga, and I thought it was very different, we could have it more times, not only that, too, but I think we could have more... I don't know... perhaps more dynamic. (Psychology student, 21 years old)

I think they could keep doing it like this, I have no suggestion. I just wish they would try to keep the group with few people, as it was. (Life Sciences student, 21 years old)

## Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the experience of undergraduate students concerning a group intervention based on ACT due to the need to implement strategies to work on the mental health of university students. Studies show that although researchers and universities have dedicated themselves to seeking different strategies to help students, the mental health services offered by these institutions still reach few students. One of the factors contributing to this is the issue of stigmatization. Thus, students often do not recognize that they need help or even do not feel encouraged to seek it (Conley et al., 2013). In this study, it was possible to observe, in the students' statements, how many of them believed that this type of service was for "problematic" people and considered participation in the program a taboo break. These data reinforce the idea that curriculum-based interventions contribute to reducing the stigma and, thus, reach a greater number of students.

The participants of this study reported having identified themselves a lot with the techniques used, such as mindfulness and metaphors practices, so that they could use them in

life in general. Previous studies have pointed to the inclusion of techniques, based on ACT, in undergraduate programs as a promising path for preventive mental health treatment (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Levin et al., 2015). By introducing programs that promote PF, there is a possibility of a decrease in the number of students who need individualized therapy. In addition, interventions may allow instructors to identify students with vulnerabilities to mental disorders or tendency to drop out of undergraduate or graduate studies, enabling them to indicate more substantive therapeutic support (Paliliunas et al., 2018).

One of the most important aspects of the present study is the decrease in participants' PI. In the students' reports, it was possible to observe different aspects of experiential avoidance. This central PI-linked process refers to efforts to avoid uncomfortable emotions or thoughts. However, it is known that the more one tries to avoid or suppress an emotion, the more intense it becomes. Therefore, these attempts to inhibit unpleasant experiences increase the frequency of anguish and stress of these experiences and the feeling of being disconnected from oneself (Renner & Foley, 2013). As observed in the statements transcribed here, the students reported that they had difficulty in accepting painful feelings, so that the suffering was increasing more as they judged themselves or tried to get rid of it. However, they were learning to welcome emotions more and take better care of themselves.

Participants also reported being very anxious about college exams, so that they often gave up studying or taking them. In some cases, they even almost dropped out of the program. In university students, it is very common for experiential avoidance to appear in the form of procrastination. The pressure of studying and getting good grades causes uncomfortable feelings and thoughts, such as "I'm not going to be able to handle it" and "I'm not going to be able to do well". In order to avoid contact with these thoughts, many students choose to distract themselves with other activities and end up putting aside their responsibilities of the university instead of creating effective strategies to deal with them (Pistorello et al., 2013). Gagnon et al. (2016) examined the relationship between PF measures, compromised action, and procrastination reported by university students and concluded that the degree of action compromised was the most significant predictor of student procrastination, suggesting that interventions with PF process may be particularly useful.

Cognitive fusion usually goes along with experiential avoidance. Thoughts are treated as unquestionable truths, which can result in self-defeatist conduct on the part of the individual. A college student can believe so faithfully in the thought "You will fail a test", for example, that they do not even study. The student is so fused with this thought that their behavior ends up occurring in its favor, seeking to ensure that this thought becomes a reality (Pistorello et al., 2013).

The ability to understand that a thought is not an absolute truth to be followed, but only one thought, is paramount to students, who are constantly labeled for their academic performance. Often, a simple low grade triggers several thoughts that bring with them definitive judgments, such as "I am a failure" (Pistorello et al., 2013).

In the study by Grégoire et al. (2018), in which an ACT-based university intervention was conducted, there was a positive impact on school involvement, revealing that ACT can help reduce the risk of university dropout. This finding is important because an increasing number of researchers and educators agree that student involvement is essential to deal with poor performance, boredom, and high dropout rates (Conley et al., 2013).

Mindfulness practices were mentioned several times in the participants' reports. It was possible to observe that the techniques helped students with the ability to stay in contact with the present moment, also facilitating the understanding that situations and emotions experienced here and now do not define the individual – which refers to the concept of contextual self. Mindfulness has great utility in the university context, as it is correlated with more rational ways of dealing with difficult situations and is mainly shown to be effective in reducing stress, which is considered high in this population (Leppink et al., 2016).

Still, regarding PF, values are especially challenging for university students, who often understand them as goals to be achieved rather than principles to move in a meaningful direction, acting according to what is relevant (Pistorello et al., 2013). Completing a higher education program can be considered a final goal, for example, and not a step toward something meaningful and that makes sense. Thus, the values of the individual are not clear, which can result in actions that drive the person away from the so dreamed graduation – such as procrastination, as already mentioned before. When the values are clear, it becomes easier to act according to what is relevant (Hayes & Smith, 2005).

Several studies have been conducted before and have demonstrated positive effects on PF after ACT-based interventions. In this study, it was possible to perceive, through the participants' speech and qualitative analysis, several aspects articulated to ACT processes and specifically related to the students' lives, such as the stigmatization of mental health, the difficulty of students concerning the changes and pressures that come with the university, the influence of PI processes on academic performance and other aspects of life, especially experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, and lack of actions connected to values. This study advanced in relation to previous research because we sought, in this discussion, to articulate the main demands related to the mental health of students to the central processes of PF and PI in order to visualize theoretical aspects in real situations brought by the participants.

This study also has some limitations. The main one refers to the sample size so that the results presented are configured as preliminary data. In this project, there was great difficulty in disseminating the intervention within the university, in addition to the lack of alternatives that would enable students to participate in the program since many reported schedule incompatibilities. Several students work, do internships or are fellows in research groups. This makes it difficult to participate in extracurricular activities at times inverse to those of the class. Thus, as pointed out by several students in this sample, if this program were to be included as a course or complementary activity, it would be of great importance and would reach a much larger number of students. Moreover, because it is a small sample, it is suggested that future studies

be conducted with larger samples and compare different intervention formats, with different workloads, for example, to help universities find a possible path in working with the prevention and promotion of the mental health of university students.

### **Final considerations**

This study aimed to explore the experience of undergraduate students with an intervention to reduce stress based on ACT. The motivation for this work arose when we identified the richness contained in the statements of the participants, who were granted a semi-structured interview after completing the program.

The qualitative analyses made it possible to identify that, for this sample, this intervention, in workshop format, is feasible, useful and could be included as an academic course. In addition, in the participants' statements, the processes of PF and PI emerged many times without necessarily having used the names of each of the six processes, indicating that, although the intervention took place in the form of experiential-theoretical classes, the experiences were significant and gave meaning to this students' internal and external experiences. This reinforces the importance of programs integrating both psychoeducation, through a more theoretical part, and experiences to internalize and give meaning to what is being learned. As observed in the participants' statements, homework, including the reading of the chapters, mindfulness practices, and compromised actions, was useful for students to develop the skills necessary to better deal with daily adversities without departing from their personal values.

Finally, despite having a small sample and preliminary data, this study reinforces the positive effects of ACT on the mental health of university students. Through techniques that help reduce PI and promote PF, students find different ways to deal with experiences, which helps reduce stress, decrease procrastination, and increase well-being. In addition, the analyses showed that the scope of the intervention went beyond the academic context and extended to other aspects of the students' lives, which is fully in line with one of the central objectives of the ACT – to approach the life you value.

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