

## Impact of Covid-19 on mental health

### O impacto da Covid-19 na saúde mental Impacto del Covid-19 en la salud mental

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When we least expected it, the fear of death resurfaced with all its ancestral force. Until then, the majority of the world's population was experiencing a kind of sedation of the senses about the impacts of the misery caused by the global economy on people's mental health. And in the extreme era of globalization, when we had already become accustomed to the illusory comfort promoted by the consumer society, here comes a virus that makes us wake up from the sweet and warm maternal lap of capitalism.

The state of psychic vulnerability in which we live, in this global village, was until then, denied and stigmatized — although, the world's mental health indicators, even before the pandemic, already showed the abyss in which we were stuck as humanity, in the face of the chaos of the patriarchal, productivist, and capitalist model of society. How to stay mentally healthy in the face of growthism, unbridled consumerism, environmental degradation, and extreme poverty?

The determinants of mental health and mental disorders include not only individual characteristics, but also social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors. And, of course, illness does not affect everyone in the same way or intensity.

The impact of the new coronavirus has affected everyone's mental wellbeing, intensifying the effects of another pandemic that society had been facing for years but had been silenced by stigma — mental illness. The burden of mental disorders continues to grow worldwide, with significant impacts on health, human rights, and the economy in all countries<sup>(1)</sup>.

The pandemic of COVID-19 has aggravated the effects of disease and mental disorders, such as depression, stress, anxiety, and drug abuse. In Brazil, as in other countries, the most vulnerable populations have been overly harmed by the pandemic's destructive effects, which, in turn, potentiate inequalities, exclusions, and social inequities. However, the crisis in Brazil is further aggravated by the dysfunctional way in which the current government has dealt with it — denialism, reduction of funds to support scientific research and public service, systematic attack on the Brazil's

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unified health system (SUS), and deconstruction of public policies to support the poorest populations.

The increase in psychic symptoms and mental disorders during the Pandemic has been very significant. Among the possible causes of this increase, highlights include: the direct action of the virus on the central nervous system; traumatic experiences associated with infection or death of close people; stress induced by the change in routine due to social distancing measures; changes in work routines or affective relationships; interruption of treatment due to difficulties in accessing the service, among others.

In addition, prolonged living together within the home has augmented the risk of maladjustment in family dynamics. Added to this are income reductions and unemployment, which further worsen the strain on families. And, also, the deaths of loved ones in a short period of time, along with the difficulty to perform the farewell rituals, hindering the grieving experience and preventing the adequate resignification of losses, increasing stress<sup>(2)</sup>.

These scenarios are not independent. That is, a person may have been exposed to several of these situations at the same time, which will expand the risk of developing or worsening existing mental disorders. Moreover, we live in a moment of uncertainty about the future, since we are not free of new variants or pandemics by other types of viruses. And it seems that inequality will broaden and the harmful effects of globalization will persist.

People with mental disorders need support from health and social care services, and this assistance is still not guaranteed for everyone who needs it, not to mention the poor quality of care. According to World Health Organization (WHO), the pandemic of COVID-19 has disrupted essential mental health services in almost all countries, while the demand for mental health is rising.

The Pandemic that affected all of humanity had a strong negative impact on the mental health of nursing professionals. In addition to the severe effects of COVID-19, these professionals experienced, since the beginning of the pandemic, excessive workload, risk of contamination, lack of Individual Protection Equipment (IPE), pressure from organizations and society, isolation, discrimination/stigma, ethical dilemmas in performing procedures, among others. Such circumstances triggered: Burnout syndrome, irritability, stress, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, self-medication, emotional disorders, impotence, severe mental illness, sleep disorder, eating disorders, fear and insecurity of contaminating family members, drug/medication use and deaths<sup>(3)</sup>.

It is worth noting that, even before the Pandemic, nursing professionals were already experiencing many of these problems. And, with the majority of this profession being made up of black women, other factors add up. Women assume the responsibility and most of the domestic and caregiving tasks. Moreover, different forms of violence against women have persisted and expanded in Brazil, with black women being the most affected by domestic violence<sup>(4)</sup>.

Another relevant context that affects us as educators is mental health in the university context. How is mental health in our academic environment? What is the role of the university and of each of us in promoting the mental health of students, faculty, staff, and society?

We live, in the academic environment, in a time of toxic productivity, with no room for creation outside the international molds of knowledge production. We have been falling ill as practitioners of the scientific community's self-limiting cognitive model, which causes the community not to realize that its capacity to act on reality is much greater than that which this model presupposes. Capitalist techno-science, focused on satisfying the interests of the global economy - very well-designed and entrenched mainly in graduate studies - competes with the timid and still embryonic experience of solidary science, based on a critical perspective of education and focused on satisfying collective needs. In our classrooms, we observe undergraduates and graduate students with symptoms of anxiety, anguish, depression, hopelessness and suicidal ideation, while among professors we observe depression, irritability, sleep disturbance, exhaustion, anger, use of tranquilizers and others.

The construction of alternative scenarios is fundamental to overcome the crisis of capital expressed in the pandemic. Our inner life bypasses all this quest for knowledge-merchandise, we dehumanize and sacrifice ourselves, become workaholic with pride; compulsive, anxious, and agitated with vanity. Nor do we find ourselves in time-space, and we alienatedly dream of an infinite existence. Were we healthy before the Pandemic? Is the world becoming abnormal?

Eternally excluded from each other, with no time for the starry sky or to step on the wet earth. Is it possible to experience the feeling of integration away from nature? Without this connection to the Earth, it is possible to obtain the energy necessary to develop our natural gifts, abilities, and talents? Or don't you need to! We have models, processes, routines and protocols that make it possible to produce a little more, or a lot more, of the same. Without this connection with the Earth, with people and their wonderful differences, many plans and dreams will disappear because they will find no way to manifest themselves. Only through the connection with each other and the Earth can we keep active the ability to create infinitely.

More than ever, we need to humanize ourselves! We need to know how to care! To take care of the planet, of the other, to know how to take care of ourselves, of our emotions and our affections. Share dreams, weave tomorrow, the collective becoming, survive... Are we facing a new time? Probably yes.

We went to sleep in one world, woke up in another. It is hard to explain the feeling of strangeness that we are living. Art anticipates everything, but we don't realize it. In *The Metamorphosis*<sup>(5)</sup>, Franz Kafka already sensed this. One morning, awakening from disquieting dreams, Gregory Samsa found himself in bed transformed into a monstrous insect. Like the character, faced with this terrible Pandemic, the social isolation it imposed, and the magnifying glass it put on inequalities and their effects on humanity, even though very upset, we are forced to deal

with reality. How will we turn around? How can we expect a cure for that which essentially derives from what we desire in the contemporary world - to consume? What mental health is possible to build in the face of the Pandemic, its aggravations and pre-determinations?

Empathy has become the watchword. Times of crisis are also times of transformation. The nightmare we are living collectively calls us to another way of being in the world - a more empathetic one. We need to recognize and learn to support that the other exists and desires as we do; that they are hungry and have needs.

We live in a time of waiting and anguish. Who will humanity be after this experience with the Pandemic? In this time of strangeness and amazement, we are led to think about the fragility in which we are built, to think about our insufficiency, interdependence, and death itself. An opportunity to deepen the experience of self-knowledge.

And, while we wait and face this enormous collective-existential challenge, we must hope. Our ability to confront it is related to the limitations of life scenarios, work experiences, access to health care and assistance, and difficulties imposed by the overlapping inequities. But beyond this, it is also associated to affections, human creativity, and our ability to say yes to life - even in its toughest and strangest problems. Nevertheless, we must maintain hope and activate it through our creative imagination.

In the Autopoise Theory, Maturana and Varela<sup>(6)</sup> describe that humanity has the capacity to reconstruct the world and continuously produce itself, but evolution only comes from care. Without love and acceptance of the other next to us, there is no socialization, and, without this, there is no humanity. Each living individual is what he or she constructs from his or her perception, that is, from his or her worldview, while this same reality also reflects back on the individual, constructing him or her.

More than ever, we need to humanize ourselves. We need to know how to take care of ourselves, our emotions and affections. The emotions experienced in this Pandemic can lead us to use our power favoring life through a "collective hope".

Sharing dreams, weaving tomorrow, the collective becoming, surviving... Are we facing a new time? Probably yes.

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