

MENTAL HEALTH'S STRENGTHENING IN THE PERIOD OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Strengthening mental health during any type of pandemic is crucial social and medical service, for the pandemic and post-pandemic thoughts, emotions and actions, with resocialization through the establishment of a healthy lifestyle. The emergence of the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) is a novelty and much is unknown about this infectious disease, which increases the personal experience of danger and fear of uncertainty. This is a normal reaction to a normal extent, but excessively form needs particular mental health support. Fear can be a reaction to an actual threat or a perceived threat- a threat that we assume or expect and perceive based on our personal assessment or experience of risk. Panic, on the other hand, is an intense or strong experience of fear. Thus, fear, severe anxiety or panic, and our behavior in this regard is often not a reflection of actual risk based on epidemiological data, but a reflection of our personal experience of risk or danger. Some perceive increased personal risk and some reduced, which then affects their behavior. Fear, during the epidemic, helps us to some extent to focus on possible sources of threat and care for our health. This coronavirus condition certainly has the characteristics of a crisis, most notably an "exhaustion crisis" because it lasts a long time and has a cumulative effect on us and causes crisis relations. In this crisis, some will also need psychological help. In this specific crisis related to the coronavirus pandemic, it is important to provide psychological first aid, in accordance with the current situation and the recommendations of health experts and the crisis headquarters.

Keywords: Covid-19 Epidemic, Crisis, Mental Health, Fear, Panic Attack, Psychological Help.

Citation: ŠEHMEHMEDOVIĆ, S. (2022). "Mental Health's Strengthening In The Period Of Covid-19", *HABITUS Journal of Sociology*, (3), 57-70.

Atf: ŠEHMEHMEDOVIĆ, S. (2022). "Covid-19 Döneminde Ruh Sağlığının Güçlenmesi", *HABITUS Toplumbilim Dergisi*, (3), 57-70.

Başvuru / Received: 09 Şubat 2022 / 09 February 2022

Kabul / Accepted: 15 Mart 2022 / 15 March 2022

Derleme Makale / Review Article.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of mental health is crucial for human behavioral reactions, based solely on psychosomatic integration, including the emotional, cognitive, and conative aspects of human personality. Covid-19 virus, in the form of epidemiological expression, represents a new experience for humanity in the 21st century. The uncertainty brought by the crisis, then the fears, anxiety, worries, sadness, panic, certainly affects the emotional instability of the person.

Negative alterations, depressive and impulsive tendencies, as symptoms of PTSD that can be acquired in uncertain situations such as covid-19, can cause extremely severe forms of behavioral deviations in society. Psychotherapeutic treatment, a person who is long-term exposed to external negative effects on health, is essential for the prevention of emotional disorders in the

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near future. Goal setting strategies, primary and secondary prevention are needed for implementation, through psychological advice.

Verbally and situationally accessible memorization is one way of dealing with traumatic incidents. The system of reflection, subordination and acceptance of emotions is an effective process of strengthening the emotional state of a person. Cognitive- behavioral therapy as well as Acceptance and commitment therapy have been shown to be of great importance for symptoms caused by stressors. Coronavirus or COVID-19 is now the most important public health issue across Europe. EFPA (European Federation of Psychologist' Association), as European umbrella organization for psychologists, shared some guidelines and possible actions psychologists (EFPA Recommendations for teaching Ethics for Psychologists 1999).

Providing first- class psychological support- As psychologists, their priority is to use psychological knowledge in order to be correct in communication about the virus, help avoid unnecessary anxiety and support people who have the virus affected. So here are some helpful tips:

1. Respond according to the local situation: how the situation differs from country to country, adapt to the specific situation in your country. Encouraging psychologist to join contact their local health authorities and promote their official assessment and guidelines.

2. Provide accurate facts: help people come up with true facts. Governments provide objective information about the virus in your country through the websites you visit and you can refer. The European Center for Disease Prevention (ECDP) and Control has a special website about the coronavirus that he updates regularly.

3. Communicate with children: talk about coronavirus news in an age- appropriate way. Parents can also help alleviate trouble by focusing children on routines behaviors. Remember that children will observe and manage their parents' behaviors and feelings, also their own feelings over time.

4. Stay connected in safety: Maintaining social media can foster a sense of normal functioning and provide valuable places to share feelings and relieve stress. Encourage people to share useful information with friends and family on official websites pages. And in the case of quarantine, people can still maintain contacts remotely.

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5. Coping with quarantine, Prof. Atle Dyregrov, former member of the EFPA Standing Committee on Crisis, Trauma and Disaster, he wrote a text that provides very useful information about supporting people who have to deal with the quarantine situation. The Lancet published an interesting review of psychological impact quarantine and how to reduce it.

6. Support people to seek additional help: Individuals who feel constant nervousness, long-term sadness or other long-term reactions that adversely affect their work or interpersonal relationships, you should consult a trained and experienced mental health professional health workers.

7. Promoting safety: people can improve safety by following personal protection guidelines, environmental countermeasures, social distancing countermeasures related to travel as explained in ECDP.

Online consultations, especially via video chat, offer a viable online alternative for the provision of psychological care and therapy. Most psychologists still prefer face-to-face contact with their clients or patients seeking help or support. However, in order to protect not only psychologist health, but also the health of those who seek psychological help and society as a whole, the psychologist should explore alternatives as much as possible. Research shows that the effectiveness of such teleconsultations is somewhat less optimal, but they often manage to achieve similar effects as conventional care.

Psychological Tactics

References for the psychologists (EFPA Recommendations for teaching Ethics for Psychologists 1999):

1. Discuss this possibility with the client (preferably over the phone), explaining the reason and highlighting the reason why you rely on an online consultation. Ideally, you only do this with clients or patients you have already met face to face, so you know how to optimally intervene in the real world, in case of any emergencies, such as risks of self-harm or suicide.

2. Make sure both, you and the client, are in a private and safe space to avoid interference.

3. Provide sufficient time for technical troubleshooting and support.

4. Rely on professional video consulting tools. Do not rely on programs like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Skype or Telegram. In case of any doubts, contact your member association or national body for appropriate tools.

5. Do not use a public computer, log out after the session and update your operating system and/ or applications.

6. In the event that you notice a security breach on your computer, notify your patients, notify the police, and seek help from an IT security professional. For further information or contact with the working groups, it will be created a group on the workplace 'COVID-19- questions and answers', where you can ask your question.

How To Deal with Fear Or "Manage" Our Experience of Danger And Risk?

Research (Preti, E., 2020) during some other epidemics has shown that the level of adoption of precautionary measures (preventive measures) has been associated with increased levels of anxiety and fear of infection. Excessive fear and panic, on the other hand, can do more harm than good. In order to "manage" our experience of risk, and thus our experience of fear, here are some recommendations:

Firstly, it is important to find and monitor only verified and credible sources of information. Continuity and consistency of information are also important, but not excessively and constantly. Secondly, important way we can manage our personal experience of danger is by using a strategy of asking simple questions, e.g., *is there a reason why I may be personally at increased risk of infection? Have I been in contact with possible cases of infection?* By thinking like this, we reduce the possibility of experiencing risk and increased threats on an unconscious and instinctive level, that is, we think more rationally about the possible danger.

The third recommendation is about measures and ways to reduce the risk of personal infection in the given circumstances or the infection of your family members and other close people asking the questions: *What are the behaviors that can successfully contribute to reducing the risk and spreading the infection? What are the behaviors that can protect myself and other people? Does it benefit me? Is it true? How does it help? Do I esteem myself and others enough?*

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At this point, it is again important to make decisions based on credible information from experts, i.e. to follow the advice and recommendations of experts and to adhere to preventive measures as much as possible.

With the stated ways and behaviors, we act responsibly towards our own health, but also the health of other people. This is a time to raise awareness of the importance of caring for and investing in our own health and an opportunity to embrace lifestyles through changes in our health behavior, that contribute to better health in general, including better protection against both communicable and chronic non-communicable diseases (e.g. cardiovascular diseases, malignant neoplasms, chronic respiratory diseases, mental disorders, etc.). That would be the fourth important recommendation and encouragement when talking about what we can do. It includes both mental and physical health care.

Some research in countries that have experienced outbreaks of infectious diseases such as influenza, SARS, etc. has shown that *a large part of the population felt helpless, terrified and worried*. Regular and repetitive information with clear and simple messages and an empathetic approach to normal stress reactions help to normalize emotional reactions and encourage *hope and resilience*. Furthermore, let's not forget, not everyone reacts equally to situations of potential health threat, some respond with greater stress, anxiety and worry.

Regardless of the severity and severity of the threat, some individuals will be more and some less upset. Therefore, it is important in these moments to provide support to those who are under greater fear and concern, which is the fifth important recommendation. It is important to encourage optimism, but not to deny real risks.

It is important to accept that we do not all react equally and that everyone's "fear is real" and they need help, calm them down, do not judge or underestimate them or react negatively. It is also important to encourage realistic hazard assessments as well as the individual's ability to protect himself and his family by repeating accurate information, realistic risk and hazard assessments, and protective measures based on expert evidence.

Finally, the sixth recommendation, it is important to interconnect and provide support and assistance but respecting all the recommendations of health and other relevant institutions, especially about social distance. Modern technology can help us in this, i.e. social networks, e-mail, mobile phones, etc., which enable us to communicate with our loved ones, taking into account

the recommendations of experts on reduced direct contacts and social distance. In case of the need for additional psychological support and help, organized telephones for psychological help are offered.

Psychological First Aid in A Coronavirus Pandemic Situation

In this specific crisis related to the coronavirus pandemic, it is important to provide psychological first aid in accordance with the current situation and the recommendations of health experts and the crisis headquarters. So, it will be psychological first aid at a distance: by phone or the Internet (conversation, e- mail, video calls, various real- time contact applications, Skype, video conferencing, etc.). For those who provide help, as well as for those who receive it, it can be more challenging and demanding than live psychological first aid, because it is harder to make contact and because part of nonverbal communication is missing. There is only voice, voice communication over the phone, only written verbal communication via e- mail based on concise expression, there are fewer restrictions with video calls because we hear and see the person and us, but it is still reduced and limited and various technical difficulties, breaking the link, freezing the image, etc. are also common. Experience shows that it is more difficult to provide support and empathy at a distance, it is more challenging and requires specific skills that can be developed through education.

The previous professional experience of the authors of different articles, with telephone and online psychological counseling in peacetime, shows that this form of counseling provides quick and effective help, facilitates motivation for live help, often represents a bridge to care institutions. It seems that at a distance there is less resistance from clients, and that later live counseling is much easier because there are much fewer problems with establishing contact and relationships, and in the work we continue and deepen what we started.

Therefore, e- counseling is very good to get started. Experience also shows that online and telephone counseling requires professional counseling competencies, systematic education on counseling techniques and interventions. “Active listening” techniques are especially important, because they are much more important than live counseling, especially in establishing contact and trust with the client. Such counseling must be clear, but not too directive, with an optimal ratio of cognitive and emotional messages.

Users of e- counseling often point out that it is easier to decide on this form than on live counseling, that it is much easier for them after describing their problem in an email, because they feel relieved that they could confide their problem to someone. Fewer users point out that it is important for them to be able to remain anonymous and that anonymity is especially important to them in the initial, first contact, in exposing their problems, so that they feel less anxious and exposed.

Recommendation: Keep calm and take care of our mental health. We will not deceive to each other, these are not easy times. But no matter what the objective situation is, what really matters is how we experience it and how we react to it. These days we can expect that most people will be under more or less stress, and it is very important how we deal with it. This is especially important for the parents, because the reactions of the children will largely depend on their reaction.

How To Raise Optimism?

Optimism is defined as a general positive expectation of the future (Carver, Scheier and Segerstrom 2010). Greater optimism is associated with mental and physical health in covid- 19 environments, and we have already mentioned that it is associated with lower depression and stronger immune responses. Optimism- enhancing interventions use a variety of approaches, mostly based on developing future goals and often on visualization techniques, ie imagining, the best possible self- version (BPS; eg Meevissen Peters, and Alberts 2011).

These interventions usually include the following instructions:

“Imagine yourself in the future, after everything that was supposed to happen ended the best it can. You tried and managed to achieve your goal/ goals...”. Participants thus imagine their future characteristics, relationships, successes. Then you need to state your ideas using sentences like "In the future I will be/ work...", and then put those sentences into a connected story and write them down (BPS 2011).

For example, *“In the future, when this epidemic is over, I will find time to see my friends. When everything is back to normal, I will go for an afternoon walk with my child / wife once a week. I will invite friends over for lunch, every other Sunday. When everything is over, I will be organized and I will solve business obligations faster, so I will be more efficient and I will not have to complete tasks at home. When all is said and done, I will be a happy person, because I will know that we went through an ugly period responsibly and took good care of each other.”*

“Finally, we present the results of a meta- analysis of 29 optimistic psychological interventions, involving a total of 3319 techniques for raising optimism are effective (raise optimism by 30- 40%), and the “Best Future Self” technique described above is particularly effective” (Malouff and Schutte 2016).

What to remember? We cannot influence how old we are, nor whether we are a man or a woman. We can't even tell if a virus will appear in the world. But we can deal with the situation. Mental condition can affect health and health outcome, in women and men, young and old. Optimistic people are less likely to develop depressive symptoms and have a better immune system. Optimism can be learned and practiced.

Due to the current situation of the epidemic and its consequences on our health, existential security, way of doing business, relationships with family members and other people and many other areas of life, changes in physical, mental and behavioral levels are expected.

Feelings of anxiety, tension, insecurity, depression, anger are more common on:

1. The psychological level- include various forms of relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, autogenic training;
2. Meditation techniques- such as transcendental religious meditation techniques;
3. Cognitive techniques- aimed at gaining control over one's reactions to stress, by changing opinions, expectations, attitudes and beliefs;

The Family Impact

The family is one of the important foundations for building resilience in a child. Patterns of parental behavior, social and emotional interaction are some of the factors that are considered important in the development of resilience in children (Brajša - Žganec 2007). The concept of family resilience is defined as a functional system, that allows for positive adjustment of all members and strengthening of family cohesion, despite strong stressful events (Walsh 2016).

Family resilience is strengthened by maintaining close relationships with all family members, a shared approach to problem solving and mutual support, especially in situations where one family member has experienced or is experiencing some stress (Olson, 2000). Various stressful events or situations, such as the earthquake in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, can increase vulnerability and risk for potential problems. Walsh (2016), however, states that resilient families

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can overcome the complexity of cumulative stressful situations and defines that family resilience includes three main areas: *belief systems, organizational processes, and communication.*

Key processes in achieving family resilience (adapted from Walsh, 2016), as family resilience, based on next issues: “Trust systems; Organizational processes; Communication/ problem- solving processes; Find meaning in disaster; Flexibility; Clarity; Positive thoughts about the future; Connectivity; Open sharing of emotions; Transcendence (overcoming and spirituality); Mobilizing of social and economic resources; Cooperative problem solving”. The mentioned processes are of great importance for the family influence on all family members, individually. Social primary need, such as belonging to a group, a sense of protection, trust, and cultural values, is incorporated through the importance of family relationships. Mutual interaction, communication skills, developing trust, strengthening self- concept, organization of time are crucial for children and parents, in a family environment.

Here's what the parents can do (Zandifar A, Badrfam R, 2020):

1. *Organize a solid day structure*- when it's time to get up, when it's time for school, when it's time for free play, when it's lunch, when it's time to go out (according to the National Civil Protection Headquarters and your opportunities). Predictability and routine in children behaviour create a sense of security. Explain to the children in an appropriate way what is happening.

2. Don't panic- In case, any of children get symptoms that worry, like fever, sneezing, coughing, don't need to be panic. It's necessary to follow the instructions on what to do, in contact with the doctor. It's advisable to trust the experts. The parents, many times, have gone through some kind of childhood illnesses with their children.

3. *Adjust expectations according to the situation.* The parents don't need to expect themselves in crisis days to be able to work from home and cook three meals a day, entertain children perfectly, keep the house perfectly clean, exercise at home and read books. If they have to work from home, they should make time and place for it and tell the children clearly and loudly what is expected of the parents now and what is expected of them, according to the course of their age.

4. *Fear, panic and anxiety will occur crisis days.* Anxiety can take the form of chest pain, headaches, abdominal pain. Listen to the doctor's recommendations. If the parents have difficulty, they should contact the relevant mental health services and experts, for help.

5. *If the parents feel a certain level of anxiety, there are simple techniques to help themselves.* Practice to get rid of negative energy, rub the bathroom and all the fugue, reunite with the family and start recounting some very dear moments, while browsing albums and looking at pictures, occupy the brain with distraction, instead of indulging in catastrophic thoughts- count back 7 out of 348 e.g.

6. *Reduce time on social media.* Comparing themselves to others, feeling that others are doing much better, doing more or better, having more activities for children, can only jeopardize the parent's mental health.

7. *Provide children with enough running outside* (yard, close to meadows, woods, no contact with others) until other recommendations come. If the parents are banned from leaving the house or are not allowed to go outside in certain moment- it's nice to organize an exercise at home- let the children make a certain number of circles around the table, play the god of wind and run as if the wind carries them in a certain lane. It's approachable to limit time in front of screens for children, especially in the evening, so the parents can sleep and sleep in peace.

8. *Some people will find it particularly difficult, such as people with a traumatic experience.* This situation can be reminiscent of wartime and imprisonment in shelters. The parents should try to breathe deeply, do what it's recommended to reduce anxiety and contact mental health experts.

Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioral Coping Strategies

Cognitive- behavioral therapy believes that thoughts, emotions and behavior are reciprocally related, and working on one of these three aspects has a direct impact on the other two aspects. • *Cognitive errors* (catastrophizing, exaggerating the negative, black- and- white thinking, etc.). We look for evidence for and against these thoughts and *create positive thoughts*. It has been scientifically proven that optimists have a better immune system and live longer, so let's work hard, now in these difficult times, to create optimistic positive thoughts.

• When our thoughts keep coming back and we can't control them, they become *obsessive thoughts*, then is the best remedy for distraction. Force our brain to focus on something else for at least 15 minutes. Any activity, we have listed in the conduct, may distract you. For some, it will be computer work, for others games, for others singing, talking to someone... It is great to solve crossword puzzles or play sudoku and it also helps to count from 1000 to three (997, 994, 991, 988 etc.) or count to 1000- 5 and less 4... (995, 991, 988, 986, 985...).

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• And there is another interesting technique, in which we deliberately *allow ourselves to come up with the worst possible scenarios* and create the worst possible negative thoughts, but limit it to half hours every day at the same time. After half an hour, ask yourself, and *if all this worst happens, what would I do? The answer is always: I would manage, I would do this and that.*

• *The technique of imagining is also important for creating positive thoughts.* Put on some relaxing music and travel in your mind to where you have already been or are imagining new journeys. New cities, landscapes... Black is never so black and hopeless. After, if you have a feeling that you cannot cope with your fears, anxious and depressed thoughts, you can seek the help of experts.

Emotions-

- *Do deep, abdominal breathing techniques;*
- *Relaxation techniques:* autogenic training, meditation, yoga, mindfulness exercises (and we are left to work on negative anxiety or depressive thoughts).

Behavior-

• *Create a daily routine.* Try to make a daily plan. Get up at the same time, have breakfast and get to work if you work from home. Take a lunch break and continue. After work activities, allow yourself pleasant activities.

• *Plan and organize pleasant activities in the house:* watching serials, movies, board games, computer games, reading books, drawing, playing, singing, cooking, etc. Treat yourself to everything what you used to dream about and didn't have time for...

- *Tell jokes and watch comic movies.* Humor is also very important for mood.
- *Watch the news program/* news only twice a day and follow all the advice of our crisis headquarters.
- *Don't google too much about viruses, diseases, earthquakes....* Rather google virtual museums, view photos of cities...
- *Rest, sleep as much as possible.*

- *Eat healthy.* At the time when meals are scheduled, minor violations are allowed. Don't overeat, don't eat too many sweets, don't drink too much alcohol, and don't even drink too much coffee. Caffeine, nicotine and alcohol stimulate (raise) anxiety.

- *Smoke as little as possible,* use this moment and make a decision to quit smoking.

- *Use as few tranquilizers as possible on your own initiative,* i.e. conscientiously follow the instructions of a doctor and psychiatrist over the phone, Skype. Organize Skype parties, online music listening, karaoke, change of recipes...

- *Maintain regular personal hygiene and hygiene and cleanliness in the apartment.* Don't neglect yourself. Take off your pajamas in the morning and dress like you're going to work. Make up yourself.

- *Physical activity* is extremely important for both, the body and the psyche, because it creates endorphins that calm us down. So do simple physical exercises. The internet is full of different workouts.

- *Work on yourself.* Enroll in online courses either for professional development or for working on yourself, e.g. assertiveness training, wellbeing course, how to be happy, etc.

- *Work on your intimacy.* Sometimes routine, daily commitments, hard work, children, fatigue, exhaustion become fulfilled and we no longer have the strength for intimacy with a partner. Isolation is a time when you can work on sexual reunification.

- *It is important to be here and here in the present,* but it is also allowed to plan new projects, both- work and private.

CONCLUSION

Samuel Modiano (Italian Jew), born in 1930 (still alive), the man who defeated Auschwitz-Birkenau, said that there he "learned how strong a man can be and in what incredible conditions he can survive". That is reflection of psychotherapy called as Logotherapy, by Victor Frankl. Dereflexion and Paradoxical intention are the methods which are replaceable for recovering some dangerous in external causes. Also, defence mechanisms are particular coping strategies, especially in psychodynamic approach, which are very useful to being applicable.

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Analysing of Mental health in Covid- 19 period, we relayed on primary educational prevention based on several recommendations. It is necessary to become careful and strengthen immunity. We can look at the Corona virus as something dangerous, which it really is, but we can also look at it as a kind of challenge, that will give us the opportunity for a new, better and more constructive life. We are all strong and of course that we will be able to defeat both the crown virus and the aftermath of the earthquake. Share common values, express positive thoughts about the future, seek meaning in adversity in accordance with their attitudes and beliefs.

Setting boundaries for children, but being a little flexible in this special situation, is new to both you and your children. Don't forget to keep in touch with extended family members and friends- modern technology makes this a lot easier these days. Learn how to set up a video or conference call, let your kids learn from you. The most important thing- talk clearly and openly with children, share emotions, verbalize that you are also afraid, that you are sad, worried... (however you feel).

Allow them and encourage them to tell you about their feelings, what they miss, what they find difficult, and what they may find great (don't criticize them if they say it's ingenious, because they don't have to meet someone every day at school who is not very nice). Encourage their openness, organize joint activities, that you will enjoy and laugh in spite of everything.

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