

Empathy and mental health in the context of pandemic by COVID-19

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In view of the emergence of betacoronavirus SARS-CoV-2, in December 2019, in Wuhan, China, and the lack of adequate treatment and vaccine, social isolation measures were adopted in order to combat contagion by the virus. These sudden changes in the daily life of the population have contributed to developing intra or interpersonal conflicts such as fear, anxiety and even panic.

Allied to this, the dissemination of fake news further aggravates this situation. And people tend to focus attention on themselves, as a way of self-protection and escape from anything that threatens their existence. However, this behavior and similar ones are not always considered healthy. Lately, many attacks and hostility against health professionals have been reported, they are rejected and accused of spreading the new coronavirus, due to direct contact with infected people.

The occurrence of social rejection, discrimination, xenophobia and even hostility towards those categories that are most vulnerable to the virus,⁽¹⁾ in addition to being unfair and regrettable, denotes a lack of empathy for those who are, to the hardest, in the control of this pandemic.

In addition, there have been increasing cases of mental illness among health professionals working in adverse conditions, the absence of adequate materials for their

individual protection, among other issues. Physical and emotional exhaustions are reported in this arduous task of fighting COVID-19. Workers experience a work environment permeated by a variety of stressful elements that compromise their quality of life, physical and emotional well-being.⁽²⁾ In this perspective, attention is drawn to the importance of empathetic behaviors as a way of nurturing and giving comfort to those who struggle to overcome this evil.

In this regard, empathy emerges as a form of psychic comfort, since it contributes to the promotion of increased social behaviors, as well as helping to control stress. This perception runs through three components: the affective, based on compassion and concern for others; the cognitive, related to the understanding of the other; and the behavioral, which recognizes the perspectives and feelings of another person.⁽³⁾ This characteristic is fundamental for the promotion of mental well-being. Empathetic people tend to be more generous, wiser and more compassionate, therefore having a better relationship with others, accepting their differences and using strategies in conflict management, without manipulation and coercion.⁽⁴⁾

In this context, empathy corresponds to the capacity, as a society role, to comprehend, understand and recognize the work developed by health professionals as caregivers and non-threatening agents for the population's health. Furthermore, the act of respecting the rules of isolation or social detachment and quarantine is seen as, not only an attitude of responsibility and love for others, but as a pro-social, empathic act.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends not to associate ethnicity or nationality to individuals infected with COVID-19. Also, it emphasizes the importance of compassion and kindness as a way to support health professionals and infected people so that they continue, respectively, to provide their assistance and hope for a better future.⁽⁵⁾

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