

## Mental Health, COVID-19 and Social Distancing: contributions of Positive Psychology to work and other living spaces

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### Abstract

In addition to the biological and economic consequences, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has generated changes in the way we see ourselves and relate to others and to society. Some factors such as social isolation, feelings of estrangement in situations of social interaction, feelings of unpredictability and vulnerability in the face of increasing awareness of our finiteness and the lack of control over events have generated impacts on mental health. Based on the mentioned context, this study aimed to discuss the possible contributions of Positive Psychology as a strategy for maintaining mental health. Studies point to the importance of mapping individual capacities and strengths so that positive strategies for overcoming critical events are outlined. In the workspace, relationships of help and organizational support, which demonstrate compassion, honesty, respect and trust with alignment of organizational purposes to individual ones, are strategies for the preservation of mental health in times of pandemic.

**Keywords:** mental health; COVID-19; positive psychology.

### Resumo

*Saúde Mental, COVID-19 e Distanciamento Social: contribuições da Psicologia Positiva para o trabalho e outros espaços de vida.* Além das consequências biológicas e econômicas, a pandemia causada pela COVID-19 tem gerado modificações na maneira como nos vemos e nos relacionamos com os outros e com a sociedade. Alguns fatores como o isolamento social, as sensações de estranhamento em situações de convívio social, os sentimentos de imprevisibilidade e vulnerabilidade frente à ampliação da consciência da finitude e da falta de controle tem gerado impactos na saúde mental. A partir do contexto mencionado objetiva-se discutir sobre as possíveis contribuições da Psicologia Positiva como estratégia de manutenção da saúde mental. Pesquisas apontam para a importância de mapear capacidades e forças individuais para que sejam traçadas estratégias positivas de superação em eventos críticos. No espaço de trabalho, as relações de ajuda e suporte organizacional, que demonstrem compaixão, honestidade, respeito e confiança com alinhamento dos propósitos organizacionais aos individuais, são estratégias para a preservação da saúde mental das pessoas, em tempos de pandemia.

**Palavras-chave:** saúde mental; COVID-19; psicologia positiva.

### Resumen

*Salud mental, COVID-19 y distanciamiento social: contribuciones de la psicología positiva al trabajo y otros espacios de vida.* Además de las consecuencias biológicas y económicas, la pandemia causada por COVID-19 ha generado cambios en la forma en que nos vemos y nos relacionamos con los demás y con la sociedad. Algunos factores como el aislamiento social, sentimientos de extrañamiento en situaciones de interacción social, sentimientos de imprevisibilidad, vulnerabilidad y fragilidad ante la creciente conciencia de nuestra finitud y la falta de control han generado impactos en la salud mental. A partir del contexto mencionado, el objetivo discutir las posibles contribuciones de la Psicología Positiva como estrategia para mantener la salud mental. La investigación apunta a la importancia de mapear las capacidades y fortalezas individuales para que se delineen estrategias positivas para superar eventos críticos. En el espacio de trabajo, las relaciones de ayuda y apoyo organizacional, que demuestran compasión, honestidad, respeto y confianza con alineación de los propósitos organizacionales a los individuales, son estrategias para la preservación de la salud mental de las personas, en tiempos de pandemia.

**Palabras clave:** salud mental; COVID-19; psicología positiva.

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 is characterized as a serious critical incident, which has impacted humanity in different ways, such as the loss of family members, layoffs, financial restrictions, social isolation and decreased freedom (Zanon, Zanon, Wescheler, Fabretti, & Rocha, 2020). In this sense, one can think that we are living in a unique moment, in which we need to strengthen our mental health, in order to face with resilience the adversities of the current moment.

We are facing an invisible threat, called SARS-CoV-2, which is little known, but which poses a risk to human life, causing a type of pneumonia called COVID-19 (Huang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). The main symptoms resulting from the infection caused are fever, cough, tiredness, vomiting, headache and difficulty breathing (Ministério da Saúde [MS], 2020).

In addition to the biological and economic consequences, the new coronavirus has a significant impact on mental health, especially the fear of exposure to contagion, which may lead to illness and death, as well as conditions of isolation and social distancing, generated by the context of the pandemic (Barros Delben et al., 2020). These factors seem to enhance mental health disorders, especially in people with a history of physical or psychological health problems, or in those who are on the “front line”, caring for the contaminated population and at risk of life (Barros Delben et al., 2020; World Health Organization [WHO] 2020).

As contagion occurs predominantly through interpersonal contacts, leaders of countries in general have opted for quarantine as an alternative to reduce the spread of the virus. Such a decision supposes social isolation and distance. Previous studies have shown that from the implementation of isolation and social distancing measures there has been a substantial decline in infection rates in countries affected by the pandemic (K. Leung, Wu, Liu, & Leung, 2020; W. J. Leung & Leung, 2020; Kisslerl, Tedijanto, Goldstein, Grad, & Lipsitch, 2020). Despite the effectiveness of contingency measures to prevent the spread of the virus, recent scientific evidence indicates negative psychological impacts, due to the determination of quarantine as a measure of containment in other epidemics (Brooks et al., 2020; Hawryluck et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2020). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been different, the measures adopted and the nature of the situation have had a negative impact on mental health.

In view of the context described here, along with the need to think about ways to preserve mental health,

this study aimed to discuss the possible contributions of positive psychology as a strategy for maintaining mental health and promoting quality of life, well-being and happiness, at work and in other areas of life in times of pandemic.

The incentive in relation to quality of life, well-being and happiness, should be among the priorities in health actions. The improvement and preservation of mental health will strengthen people, in the face of the need to face positively (choices, decisions, changing habits, self-care, etc.) the adversities that characterize this moment, in addition to effectively contributing to the preparation of the immune system defense of the organism (WHO, 2020).

## **Impacts of COVID-19, Isolation and Social Distancing on Mental Health**

The context of the pandemic has generated many changes in the way we view and relate to others and to society. Some factors in particular may come to interfere with our mental health, for example, psychic dullness caused by social isolation, feelings of strangeness in situations of social interaction, feelings of unpredictability, vulnerability and fragility in the face of increasing awareness of our finitude and lack of control over events (Humemovic, 2019).

Isolation and distancing, by physically distancing people, also provide psychic or existential distancing and isolations. The feeling is that, “each one goes to their world”. The use of masks in the public space, for example, seems to psychologically distance people, where each “sees” the other, as a potential agent of “infection”.

The decrease in face-to-face relationships, generated by social isolation measures, frustrates the natural human motivation to relate to other people, either for the purpose of helping each other or to satisfy the needs and expectations we desire in relation to life (Maslow, 1954). In a study of adult development carried out by researchers at Harvard University since 1938, with 700 men, discovered that the key to staying happy and healthy throughout life is the quality of our relationships (“Harvard study on adult development”, 2020). In view of this, it is observed that the others validate our existence and identity before the world.

Finally, the unpredictability, which means uncertainty about the end of the pandemic, frustrates the need with regard to our concrete and predictable perspectives regarding everything around. The awareness

that there is no right or scheduled time to end this critical stage of our lives, the lack of vaccine or effective treatment, adaptations with regard to professional activities (job losses, salary reductions, forced home office, new occupational safety protocols, etc.) tend to influence the destabilization of our emotional health.

Brooks et al. (2020), when conducting a literature review, in 24 articles on the psychological impact in quarantine periods, found that in most studies found, negative psychological effects were reported, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress, mental confusion and anger, generated by aspects related to fear of being infected, quarantine duration, financial loss, frustration, boredom, inadequate information and stigma caused by contamination.

Another study by Wang et al. (2020) during the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak with 1,210 people from 194 cities in China, more than half of the participants classified the psychological impact as moderate to severe and about a third had anxiety from moderate to severe. In the same perspective, previous studies have pointed out that most of the adverse effects resulting from quarantine can be wide-ranging, long-lasting and arising as a result of restrictions on freedom. Moreover, they also found that voluntary quarantine (self-confinement), carried out with the purpose of protecting themselves and others from being infected by the virus, is associated with less suffering and complications in the long run, unlike the imposed quarantines (Brooks et al., 2020; Hawryluck et al. 2004).

It is important to understand that physical and relational restrictions partly interfere with self-control and free will to make choices. Decisions become predominantly external. At work, reality changes and we are subjected to new circumstances (virtual meetings) and demands (the invasion of the private space with the massive use of the home office). Those who work in essential activities are exposed and need to learn to deal with different situations of unpredictability and insecurity never seen before (Barros Delben et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020).

However, we should understand that, however critical the situation may be, we will always have choices. Not choosing or positioning is already the choice we made about something (Frankl, 1991). Therefore, when considering the possibilities we have to make choices, we will address in the next section, the possible contributions of Positive Psychology, in the preservation and promotion of Mental Health, in critical and high tension moments.

## Positive Psychology and Mental Health Promotion: possible contributions

From the perspective of looking at the “half full of the glass”, isolation and social distancing can be understood as moments of learning, growth and opportunities (Schein, 2009a, 2009b), which may be conducive to resignify beliefs (Beck et al., 1979) and give new meanings to life (Frankl, 1991, 2015). This means practicing realistic optimism, understanding the harm of the situation as transitory, not blaming yourself for their existence, adopting self-care behaviors and motivating yourself to overcome them.

In general, studies show that people with positive expectations for the future, especially when in situations considered critical, tend to be healthier, age with quality of life and live longer (Seligman, 2019). In this perspective, when being trapped in a concentration camp in the 2nd world war, the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, to face the hard days he lived in isolation and social distancing, established the following purposes, in order to find meaning, even in situations of suffering: survive, learn something and help people (Frankl, 1991).

The era of uncertainty that human beings are going through during the pandemic period caused by COVID-19, requires understanding the importance of the potential development of learning. The unique, unquestionable worldview, which guides us about what is right and wrong, no longer makes sense (Claxton, 2005). It will be necessary in the world in transition, from “pandemic” to “endemic”, to build a “new normal”.

In order to face external events in a positive way, self-knowledge is necessary. The exercise of self-knowledge supposes expanding self-awareness (who am I?) makes reference to the knowledge of capacities, virtues and limitations (Dalai-Lama & Cutler, 2004). Self-esteem is an evaluative component of self-concept with positive impacts on self-knowledge and is characterized by thoughts and feelings nurtured by themselves. From this perspective, self-esteem is associated with mental health, social intelligence, quality of life, well-being and happiness (Hutz, Zanon, & Vazques, 2014)

Self-knowledge is the starting point for interventions that address the development of strengths of character (Niemic, 2019); an important component as a strategy to overcome the adversities imposed by isolation and social distancing, whose strengths of character have been identified as protective factors (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010) and to contribute to the healthy

development of human beings (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). Such a conception has the assumption of opposing human thoughts and feelings that lead to negativity, in order to strengthen the best, that is, the strengths and virtues (Goleman, 2016). But how to encourage the practice of the qualities of human beings, in the face of an invisible enemy like COVID-19?

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), human beings are constituted by six virtues and twenty-four strengths of character, developed through a common and intercultural language, which describe the potential qualities of a person. The forces are classified as follows: Wisdom (creativity, curiosity, critical sense, love of learning and perspective), Courage (honesty, bravery, perseverance and vitality), Humanity (kindness, love and social intelligence), Justice (impartiality, leadership and teamwork), Temperance (forgiveness, humility, prudence and self-control) and Transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, sense of humor and spirituality) (Niemic, 2019). Finally, they are related and act as a constellation, which can be considered in a gradient and found in human beings, regardless of religion, culture or nations (McGrath et al., 2010; Niemic, 2019).

Previous studies indicate that people who have experienced world wars and terrorist attacks have managed to overcome such adversities through the practice and development of character forces (Peterson & Seligman, 2003; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). In the research carried out by Peterson and Seligman (2003), it was shown that there was an increase in gratitude, hope, kindness, leadership, love, spirituality and teamwork immediately two months after the attack on the World Trade Center. Still in the referred study it was evidenced that 10 months after "9/11", these forces were high, although to a lesser degree. The findings showed that the development of character forces is opposed to physical or psychological stressors, contributing to the quality of life, well-being and happiness (Park, 2004), as well as to the improvement of depressive states (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

In this perspective, given the adverse effects caused by isolation and social distancing, attention to the positive aspects of the situation is suggested, such as: spending more time with yourself, evaluating possibilities of self-realization, being close to loved ones and creating positive visions of the future in which pandemic times will be overcome. The adoption of an optimistic perspective, but realistic, even in adverse circumstances, will contribute to the promotion of quality of life, well-being and happiness (Seligman, 2011).

Allied to this, self-care is essential to physical and psychic survival, in critical and aversive situations. When practiced continuously, self-care positively influences the development of self-esteem and the generation of beliefs that we are capable of overcoming the adversities of life (Souza & Hutz, 2016). In this sense, it is important to create routines, in order to increase feelings of self-care and self-control that help in the balance of time and space between work (professional and domestic) and leisure. Furthermore, the organized physical environment and care for personal hygiene will help to preserve mental balance and self-esteem (Ben-Shahar, 2018). Therefore, from the perspective of Positive Psychology, it is possible to learn technical and socio-emotional skills, in favor of a full and happy life, especially in times considered difficult.

Authentic displays of compassion are also paramount to mental health in the context of the pandemic. Such behaviors tend to generate positive effects on the physical and mental health of those who practice them (Davidson, 2013; Doty, 2016). The study by Lyubomirsky (2008) demonstrated that people, by exercising kindness and compassion, as a principle and conviction, increased their happiness rates by 42%.

Finally, gratitude is an exercise related to the practices previously described: a feeling combined with the emotional disposition to recognize that, despite the adversities, "life is good and worth living". As a rule, thoughts and feelings of gratitude are directed to others. People who practice gratitude, as a life principle, feel happier. Consequently, they tend to forgive, are generous and practice compassion (Emmons, 2009).

In this section, we present some possibilities, among many others, of positive practices in favor of human happiness, especially in circumstances full of uncertainty, restrictions and fear. At the present time, they are paramount to mental health. Faced with the experience of threat, we may or may not be able to overcome crises and become more empowered, attentive and resilient, depending on our attitudes and behaviors (Madeira, 2013; Teixeira, 2020).

### **Positive coping strategies: compilation of a legacy, based on a brief study by researchers in the laboratory**

By understanding the experience of a phase that requires adaptations and changes, adopting positive perspectives, based on awareness of meaning, even in

adverse situations, can preserve mental health and well-being. This perspective is guided by the assumption that it is possible to survive, learn and exercise compassion, even in extreme situations of suffering (Frankl, 1991).

As a result, between the months of March and April 2020, the period of onset of isolation and social distancing measures in Brazil to prevent contagion of the New Coronavirus, researchers from a laboratory of positive psychology at a Brazilian public university began studies about the theme and shared, in a virtual way, their experiences and respective positive survival strategies, learning and help, through the establishment of goals, with the purpose of protecting their physical and mental health.

The exploratory descriptive study was developed from a semi-structured script with the purpose of sharing knowledge and experiences among researchers and generating reflections on which strategies could be adopted in order to maintain the quality of life, well-being, happiness and mental health, in the face of critical circumstances and socio-emotional tension caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The script, answered in a written way by the respondents, was composed of three questions: 1. What behaviors were adopted in order to survive, in the face of experiences of isolation and social distancing? 2. What lessons have been learned during the pandemic context? 3. What types of assistance have you provided during the period of isolation and social distancing? For data treatment, content analysis was performed, with the creation of thematic categories.

Ten researchers from the positive psychology laboratory of the university participated in sharing information, nine of whom were female and one was male, aged between 23 and 60 years (mean = 36.1). Respondents are middle class, components of classes A, B and C (Continuous PNAD). Regarding the level of education, one participant has a post-doctorate degree, two doctorate degree, two doctorate in progress, four masters in progress and one with specialization.

The first question was related to the attitudes and behaviors adopted, in order to survive, in the face of experiences of isolation and distancing, which were full of multiple threats, both physical and psychological. Among the positive survival strategies to face this scenario, the respondents (laboratory researchers) pointed out feelings of gratitude and meditative practices, such as mindfulness, to face this critical moment. Relaxation and breathing techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing, which work with the body's tensions due to the high anxiety typical of the impact of the measures

adopted (Neborsky & Lewis, 2011) were also mentioned. Furthermore, the exercise of emotional intelligence, tolerance and respect for differences, as well as the continuous practice of forgiveness and the ability to review and recognize errors, were presented by the respondents as being of great importance.

Another relevant point, among the strategies presented, was self-care for health in general. It includes the practice of guided physical exercises, stretching, balanced diet, rest, regular sleep, discipline in the daily use of prescription drugs, personal hygiene, organization and cleanliness of the physical environment, seen as measures that promote well-being. Still in relation to self-care, psychotherapies and strategies for leisure and fun, such as films, readings, music and manual activities, were understood to be effective in regulating emotions (Leahy, 2006; Porto et al., 2008).

The social support of family, friends and others considered significant, making up the support network, was also mentioned as an important resource to minimize anxiety and tension, especially in contexts full of problems and crises (Lobburi, 2012). Social support is the perception that there are people who provide us with affective or financial resources, as well as the feeling of belonging and welcoming (Okun & Lockwood, 2003).

With regard to the second question, related to the lessons learned during the context of the pandemic, according to the researchers, from the need to adapt to the isolation and distancing measures, several possibilities for intellectual improvement were made available on the internet: workshops, courses, lectures and meetings in a virtual way provided information and knowledge on different topics, which contributed to personal improvement generating positive emotions.

Considering the types of help they developed during the period of isolation, the respondents reported that some strengths of character were exercised and punctuated as practices of compassion and solidarity, with emphasis on empathy, which means putting oneself in the other's shoes, seeking understand other people's feelings and emotions. In this context, social support was also added as an important ally.

In the midst of social isolation and distancing, contact with family and friends, whether physical or mediated by technological resources, as well as offering support to people, whether affective or financial, participating in solidarity actions, giving preference to buying products from small entrepreneurs or self-employed professionals

are positive strategies and constitute a network of mutual social support. Another highlight was the exchange of knowledge available with technology, through which they made information about Positive Psychology available, as well as learned and developed new skills.

In summary, the laboratory researchers identified that the pandemic scenario was not characterized only by negative aspects. Strategies, learnings and aids practiced from the measures of isolation and social distancing; as the activities of telework, intellectual development and communication with the use of technologies, allowed them to fulfill their role as citizens, following the guidelines and recommendations about the pandemic, while enabling the maintenance of relationships and mental health.

## Contributions of Positive Psychology within Organizations and Work

To maintain mental health in the context of organizations and work, during the pandemic period, some factors become important, for example, the policies and practices of people management, which are being used by managers, in what concerns regards treatment and care for other workers.

A survey conducted by the Gallup Institute on COVID-19 coping policies and practices, among the largest organizations in the world, with 100 human resources directors, called CHROs (Chief Human Resources Officer), revealed what people need most in relation to managers to get through the pandemic period: trust, compassion, stability and hope (Berger, 2020). Still in the same study, employees are currently observing the integrity and behavioral ethics of management policies and practices, with regard to maintaining jobs, honesty in communications and issues related to the physical and psychological safety of workers. As can be seen, the main discoveries of the Gallup Institute are in line with the concepts and studies carried out in the field of Positive Psychology, especially in organizations and at work.

Positive Psychology in Organizations and at Work can be called an area of interdisciplinary and multiprofessional knowledge with the purpose of studying the structures, processes and behaviors of people in organizations, in order to favor the construction of authentic, integral and positive behaviors aligned with the organizational values, mission and vision (Silva, Boehs, & Cugnier, 2017). Such behaviors can come to consolidate what can be called healthy organizations.

Healthy organizations are those in which significant purposes are perceived, felt and shared between the company and workers, managing to align the search for organizational productivity and profitability with the promotion of quality of life, well-being and the happiness of workers (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Silva et al., 2017). In healthy organizations, continuous improvement of interpersonal relationships between coworkers and the external environment of organizations is sought; managers are perceived as honest and trustworthy; recognition policies and practices are used; there is a concern that the physical and psychosocial environment is safe and healthy for workers; and the creation of products/services that are perceived as socially relevant, both for workers and consumers (Burchell & Robin, 2012; Salanova, 2009).

Another construct that aligns with the concept of healthy organizations is the concept of decent work. According to Ferraro et al. (2017), the decent work structure takes into account the experiences of the worker and would be the term referring to work and ethics as significant, guaranteeing workers fundamental values and principles, through social dialogue between those involved in the decision-making processes. Decent work consists of seven dimensions: (1) fundamental principles and values: this first dimension would be related to respect, acceptance and trust in the work environment; (2) adequate time and workload: the focus is on the balance between work and personal life; (3) satisfactory and productive work, linked to the meaning and purpose of the work; (4) significant remuneration for the exercise of citizenship: mean financial gains through work that provide independence and autonomy; (5) social protection: that offered to workers and their families on retirement; (6) opportunities: concerns the perception of possibilities within the work performed; and (7) health and safety: measures safe working conditions (Ferraro; Pais, Dos Santos, & Moreira, 2016).

In the context of the pandemic, in order to align organizational productivity, quality and profitability, with the quality of life, well-being and happiness of workers, it is important that companies organize people management practices that help to structure the routine and adapt the work space, so that stability and well-being exist amid such unpredictability. Among these practices are the necessary adjustments to perform remote work.

Previous studies indicate that activities in home office, on the one hand, has positive effects such as reduced travel time, decreased personal and organizational costs and greater worker autonomy; on the other hand,

it reduces social contacts, feedback and organizational support; as well as, it increases the negative impacts on family-work and work-family conflicts (Rafalski & Andrade, 2015; Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012). If, under normal conditions, the implementation of remote work required some special care, with regard to the organization of structure, support, feedback and work-family relationship; in the context of a pandemic, in which remote work has become abruptly compulsory, such care becomes even more important. In addition to the previous notes, companies in this context need to offer improvements in working conditions (such as increasing the quality of the internet, offering adequate furniture in ergonomic terms, training in the use of technology tools, creating rules for flexibilization of schedule and goals, among others) so that people can work from home, maintaining well-being and mental health.

Another way of promoting the increase in the balance and well-being of workers, especially in times of pandemic, which is directly related to the teachings of Positive Psychology, has been to encourage and offer practices in organizations that help to calm the mind, like mindfulness. According to Biavati and Souza (2017), mindfulness is the meditation process that seeks to focus attention on the present moment, increasing sensitivity to what is happening in the present, without judgment.

The mindfulness technique began to be studied in the West by Jon Kabat-Zinn, from the University of Massachusetts, around the 1970s. He did research studying the application of mindfulness to patients with cancer and chronic illnesses; then he created a stress reduction program based on the technique (Bourroul & Abdallah, 2015). Since then, mindfulness has expanded to the West and started to be used by several companies. Previous studies reveal that the practice of mindfulness has a direct relationship with the increase in well-being (Christie, Atkins, & Donald, 2017; Good et al., 2016). For Menezes, Dell'Aglio and Bizarro (2011), the improvement of well-being occurs because the practice of mindfulness provides a change in perspective in relation to the individual's perception of the world and the events around, realizing that from self-control it is possible to modify the type of reaction we have to external events.

## Final considerations

Through this article, we sought to highlight the main psychological consequences, arising from measures of

isolation and social distancing; as well as, to present some possibilities of contributions of Positive Psychology for the moments that are being experienced nowadays. The contributions are valid and relevant when considering the tensions, anxieties and fears, due to the uncertainties and threats that have been imposed on us by the pandemic.

As a result, we are relearning the allocation of space and the use of time, concomitant to the intensification of virtuality which, on the one hand, shortens face-to-face relationships; on the other hand, it frustrates the inherent need we have to belong and to relate in person, whether at work or in other areas of our lives.

The studies previously mentioned, based on Positive Psychology, show that people increase the chances of positively coping with critical circumstances they go through throughout their lives, when they become aware of their abilities and limitations and are guided by beliefs and positive action strategies. Thus, the scenarios presented here can help to increase awareness of the multiple and complex variables that influence us today and, concomitantly, the concepts and the respective ways of applying positive bases can contribute to the preservation and improvement of mental health, in this pandemic context.

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