

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36489/saudecoletiva.2021v11i68p7865-7874>

# The experience of chronic diseases in the light of phenomenological-existential psychology: a integrative review

La experiencia de las enfermedades crónicas a la luz de la psicología fenomenológico-existencial: una revisión integrativa  
A vivência das doenças crônicas à luz da psicologia fenomenológica-existencial: uma revisão integrativa

## ABSTRACT

Objective: understanding of chronic illness, aiming to understand phenomenology and its relationship with studies focused on chronic illness. Method: An integrative bibliographic research of an exploratory nature was used as a method, which was carried out based on the descriptors: chronic disease, psychology and phenomenon, performing searches for studies in the database of PubMed and Bank of Theses and Dissertations. Results: Thus, six (06) articles were found around the process of chronic illness in a phenomenological perspective, evidencing the need to come into contact with chronic illness as a form of human existence to be understood through a holistic view, the articles demonstrated the connection between chronic illness and psychosomatic experiences, which favors an expanded understanding of the health-disease process and points to the urgency of comprehensiveness in the health area. Conclusion: it is possible to consider chronic diseases as psychosomatic phenomena that need visibility by health professionals, in view of their multiple causes. Internal phenomena thus enable the construction of the subject and the various forms of existence, with chronic illness being one of them.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Chronic Disease; Psychology; Phenomenon.

## RESUMEN

Objetivo: Este estudio cuestiona cómo la psicología fenomenológica puede contribuir a la comprensión de la enfermedad crónica, con el objetivo de comprender la fenomenología y su relación con estudios centrados en la enfermedad crónica. Método: Se utilizó como método una búsqueda bibliográfica integradora de carácter exploratorio, la cual se realizó a partir de los descriptores: enfermedad crónica, psicología y fenómeno, realizando búsquedas de estudios en la base de datos de PubMed y Banco de Tesis y Disertaciones. Resultados: Así, se encontraron seis (06) artículos en torno al proceso de la enfermedad crónica en una perspectiva fenomenológica, evidenciando la necesidad de entrar en contacto con la enfermedad crónica como forma de existencia humana para ser entendida a través de una mirada holística, los artículos demostraron la conexión entre enfermedad crónica y vivencias psicossomáticas, que favorece una mayor comprensión del proceso salud-enfermedad y apunta a la urgencia de la integralidad en el área de la salud. Conclusión: es posible considerar las enfermedades crónicas como fenómenos psicossomáticos que necesitan visibilidad por parte de los profesionales de la salud, por sus múltiples causas. Los fenómenos internos permiten así la construcción del sujeto y las diversas formas de existencia, siendo la enfermedad crónica una de ellas.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Enfermedad crónica; Experiencia; Fenómeno.

## RESUMO

Objetivo: Este estudo questiona como a psicologia fenomenológica pode contribuir na compreensão do adoecimento crônico, apresentando como objetivo compreender a fenomenologia e sua relação com os estudos voltados para o adoecimento crônico. Método: Utilizou-se como método uma pesquisa bibliográfica integrativa, de caráter exploratório, a qual foi realizada a partir dos operadores: doença crônica and psicología and fenômeno, realizando buscas pelos estudos na base de dados do PubMed e Banco de Teses e Disertações. Resultados: Assim, foram encontrados seis (06) artigos em torno do processo do adoecimento crônico numa perspectiva fenomenológica, evidenciando a necessidade de entrar em contato com o adoecimento crônico como uma forma da existência humana a ser compreendida através de um olhar holístico, os artigos demonstraram a conexão entre o adoecimento crônico e experiências psicossomáticas, o que favorece a compreensão ampliada do processo saúde-doença e aponta a urgência da integralidade na área da saúde. Conclusão: possível considerar as doenças crônicas como fenômenos psicossomáticos que necessitam de visibilidade por parte dos profissionais de saúde, tendo em vista sua multicausalidade. Os fenômenos internos possibilitam assim a construção do sujeito e as diversas formas de existir, sendo o adoecimento crônico uma delas.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Doença crônica; Experiência; Fenômeno.

RECEIVED ON: 01/30/2021 APPROVED ON: 06/18/2021

## **Lanna Jennifer Elias Pereira**

Clinical psychologist. Specialist in Humanistic Psychology and Person-Centered Approach – UNIPÊ.  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7244-1003

## **Talina Bandeira Tavares da Nóbrega**

Clinical psychologist. Specialist in Humanistic Psychology and Person-Centered Approach – UNIPÊ.  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8111-0807

## **Flávio Lúcio Almeida Lima**

Adjunct professor of the Psychology course at UFCG. Doctor in Psychology from UFPB.  
ORCID: 0000-0002-9509-7444

## **Luísa Lúcia Diniz de Aguiar Silveira**

Full Professor at UNINASSAU – Natal. Master in Public Health (UEPB).  
ORCID: 0000-0002-8104-6283

## **Lidianny Braga de Souza**

Substitute Professor at IFPB, Doctor in Social Psychology at UFPB.  
ORCID: 0000-0002-9827-0839

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, the concept of disease was for a long time related to physiological conceptions where the soma (body) is attributed its causes and, consequently, its possible treatments. In this sense, the disease is characterized by a dysfunction in the body whose recovery is made through drug therapies applied to the body. However, with the perception that illness also encompasses the subject's biopsychosocial field, it became possible to understand it holistically, that is, in its entirety, considering the mind, body and the emotions involved between them. As a result, problems related to the mind and its influence on the body were gaining ground in the study of the health-disease process.<sup>1</sup>

For a better understanding, it is necessary to understand that the harmonic mind-body relationship is essential to promote balance and well-being in human beings. Faced with a disruption in the balance of body and mind, the subject becomes destabilized, possibly causing an illness that appears as a form of warning that some change (internal or external) needs to be carried out, because within what was usual, it doesn't work anymore.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, let us consider the interconnection between mind and body as

biological, mental and physical phenomena, even if unobservable and reacting in the body, thus representing the reflection of some issue related to the emotions of the subject that passes to the body causing physical symptoms characteristic of illnesses that can be chronic or not, whether they are pain, discomfort or some unpleasant sensation that the body may experience.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, attention is drawn to a current issue that refers to a bodily experience assimilated through the organism in the face of emotional disagreements between the subject and himself. Chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the cause of death for 70% of people in the world, with this percentage estimated to refer to 38 million deaths per year; of this index, 16 million people are under 70 years of age and 28 million reside in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, chronic disease can be defined as a disorder that presents itself recurrently, with the possibility of being progressive, causing death or damage to the person's bodily functioning, as well as permanent or residual mobility difficulties.<sup>4</sup>

It is known that the biomedical model has a strong contribution with regard to the training of health professionals, especially due to its emphasis on

physiological issues and the treatment of symptoms. However, based on the criticisms made to this model, Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) are currently recognized as multifactorial, and may arise throughout the individual's existence, especially in old age. In a study by Nascimento, Silva, Fonseca and Morais,<sup>5</sup> it is noticed that with aging the increase in medications is performed and the groups tend to present at least one risk factor for the development of a chronic problem, as well as sedentary lifestyle and excessive alcohol consumption.

Another risk factor is stress, which although it can be known from a range of concepts, one definition is that it is an immediate response to the being's efforts to keep adapted to situations, placing the subject on alert, who feels existentially overwhelmed,<sup>2</sup> that is, he starts to perceive life as a painful and tiring process.

In this sense, the conditions of life, work and exacerbated consumption draw attention in the psychosocial spheres, as they denote the fragility of the body and its functioning, as it affects the nervous, endocrine and cardiovascular system. In this perspective, the most complete definition of chronic disease refers to its characteristics of persistence, dysfunctionality and irreversibility,

requiring a continuous treatment from the person, considering the damage it can cause to their existence.

Psychodermatoses, in turn, reveal through the skin manifestations of traumatic situations, stress being one of the main factors. They manifest themselves in different regions of the body in the form of dermatitis, dyshidrosis, neurodermatitis, scaly lesions, psoriasis, acne, herpes, vitiligo, etc. The little literature on this subject prevents knowledge due to the causes of the development of these psychosomatic diseases, however internal conflicts tend to be drivers, in addition to being associated with other pathologies.<sup>6</sup>

It is essential to understand the development of chronic diseases as a psychosomatic phenomenon (an aspect that encompasses both the psyche and emotional responses), that is, they emerge in the face of situations of internal conflict experienced by the person. Hence the importance of integrating in the study of disease the relationship with the functioning of the mind and subjective experiences.

Husserl<sup>7</sup>, considered the precursor of the phenomenological current, he claims to be the method of knowledge criticism, being universal in terms of

the essence and the integrative study of science with knowledge. Therefore, this science seeks to perceive phenomena from the experiences of individuals, considering their contexts and ignoring interpretations from the point of view of those who use it, who even need to divest themselves of preconceived knowledge in order to enter the field of perception of the investigated subject. Thus, in contrast to the predominant science and the traditionalism of conceptions with generalist knowledge, the phenomenological method observes and describes from the singularity of individuals, covering the field of possibilities in view of the phenomenon and considering human consciousness as its main object of study.

In this sense, considering the phenomenon as an object of study, it is possible to understand the subjective mechanisms that encompass the subject, which is understood in relation to himself, with the world around him and with the space in which he inhabits. It is by observing this relationship that this study brought a systematic review of studies related to chronic diseases, psychology and phenomenon, questioning "How can phenomenological psychology contribute to coping with chronic illness?";

aiming to understand phenomenology and its relationship with studies aimed at chronic illness.

## METHODS

An integrative bibliographic research was carried out, this being from the reading of Flick,<sup>8</sup> observed as a method focused on research documents, with a focal aspect through the proposed theme. Therefore, a search was performed in the database of digital platforms of the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTI - Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações) and the Virtual Health Library (VHL), using the descriptors "doença crônica (chronic disease)" and "psicologia (psychology)" and "fenômeno (phenomenon)". The following inclusion criteria were then used: articles, monographs, theses and dissertations published between 2016 and 2021, in Portuguese, in view of the need to understand how the concepts built around chronic illness have been delineated in Brazil. Scientific publications that did not present the complete work were excluded from the study, as well as those that presented themselves as duplicates or did not fit the research proposal.

Table 1 - Results of studies for the years 2016 and 2021, database, title, author, year and method.

DATABASE	TITLE	AUTHOR(S)	YEAR	STUDY TYPE
VHL	The experience of pain in collective health practices: implications for the health of the elderly.	Santos WJ.	2016	Qualitative, anthropological approach.
VHL	Being able to be yourself: experiences with teenagers with chronic skin diseases in camp.	Costa CS, Souza MA, Melo LL.	2020	Qualitative study, based on phenomenology.
BDTI	Health beliefs and childhood cancer: a study of family members in support homes	Dias AL.	2016	Qualitative study, based on clinical research.
BDTI	The meaning attributed to the experience of communicating the diagnosis of cancer in the speeches of elderly people from the perspective of the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger	Silva MRO.	2018	Qualitative study, based on phenomenology.
BDTI	Phenomenology of the body experienced in Anorexia Nervosa	Silva MHN	2018	Qualitative study, based on phenomenology.
BDTI	Study of the association of frailty syndrome and depression	Brasileiro LEE	2017	Quantitative, sectional-based study.

Source: The author.

## RESULTS

According to the descriptors for this study, 52 scientific productions were found in total. According to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 46 were removed from the study because they did not fit the research proposal. Thus, it resulted in a total of 6 publications: 4 from the BDTI portal and 2 from the VHL platform.

According to the descriptors for this study, 52 scientific productions were found in total. According to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 46 were removed from the study because they did not fit the research proposal. Thus, it resulted in a total of 6 publications: 4 from the BDTI portal and 2 from the VHL platform.

From the results obtained, it was possible to systematize the scientific productions found in the BDTI and VHL databases (Table 1). Thus, the origin, title, authors, year published and the method used were observed. It was observed that 50% of the scientific publications found had a phenomenological basis, while the others had a qualitative approach and varied in their design. Only one publication is presented as a quantitative research. This reveals the possibility of research focused on the theme of chronic diseases from a phenomenological method, which is a descriptive science, with the objective of demonstrating the phenomenon considering the contexts in which the subjects are inserted.

## DISCUSSION

The work of Santos<sup>9</sup> brought with it the perception of the elderly facing the illness and coping with chronic diseases, which brings reflection on the experiences of the subjects, as well as the view of themselves and the context around them and understanding the meaning of

the problems in the lives of the subjects provides an opening of the field of perception about the phenomenon, that is, a search for intentionality. It thus contributes by providing subsidies for professionals in public health, finding tools for coping with psychosomatic illness.

According to Heidegger,<sup>10</sup> the human body is not restricted to a container, as it is existential and is perceived in relation, as the "being-in" that does not stand alone, as it is constituted with the world and the beings around it. Therefore, the body is not a (genetic) datum that is placed in another datum (geographical/local space). This conception perceives the subject as "being-in" relationship with the world and the phenomena around him, this term being derived from the Greek *phainomenon*, which means everything that is shown to the consciousness, which in turn refers to the receiver who attributes meaning (intentionality) to the phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

It is considering this view of the world that the studies carried out by Costa, Souza and Melo,<sup>12</sup> Silva<sup>13</sup> and Silva<sup>14</sup> present a similar method, considering that they used the phenomenological method in their investigation. It was also observed that the path of self-acceptance and self-understanding can bring with it marks in the lives of subjects, in different age groups. Perceiving oneself as a being-with others brings with it the feeling of social belonging, thus facilitating the process of coping with chronic diseases, which is a way of existing in the world. Therefore, these studies are close to the phenomenological perspective brought by Heidegger,<sup>10</sup> having in mind the understanding that human beings need to be in relationship with others and, based on that, it finds mechanisms and strategies to face daily difficulties.

In this disease process, although mentioned in some studies<sup>9,12,13,14</sup> in its physical manifestations, such as cancer,

psychodermatoses, among others, it was also possible to bring to light the recognition of mental illnesses as well as chronic ones. Thus, depression and anorexia also elucidate forms of existing that are persistently present and interfere in the process of expanding the subjects' perceptible space.<sup>15,16</sup>

This is how the connection between body and mind (soma and psyche) is not subject to systematic proof as the positivist rigor requires. The need for measurement could only be satisfied by the sum itself, as it is the embodiment, the communication, the delimitation of the subject's matter. However, the psychic causes could not be palpable, which makes the systematization of psychosomatics unfeasible, as the scientific evidence of its existence could not be based only on the physiological system.<sup>17</sup>

Heidegger contributes considering, as Dantas points out,<sup>18</sup> that the somatic sphere is essentially the expression of the realization of the human, in opposition to scientific determinism and allied to the concept of freedom as a precursor of human health. When the subject is freed from the imprisonments that his human condition attributes to him, he seeks to live its fullness, which is continuous, incessant and distressing, but necessary for the construction of new ways of existing.

## CONCLUSION

With the observation that some diseases did not have an organic origin, curiosity was raised in understanding them from factors other than the physical, thus taking into account the existential, mental and contextual aspects, visualizing in the phenomenological method a possibility of understanding of the meanings of the world for those who experience chronic illness. Entering the subjects' subjective field also means facilitating their self-understanding process, thus acting in a therapeutic manner.

<sup>1</sup> According to Heidegger, this term refers to the individual and its relationship with the contexts in which it is inserted (work, family, relationships, etc.) That is, this term refers to the subject and his everyday relationships;

The exposure to encounter losses, guilt and fears paralyze individuals in the face of different situations, delegating to other parts of themselves the condition of feeling their pain. Thus, the body becomes a receiver of the subjects' emotions, externalizing in the form of physical pain the difficulties encountered in everyday life.

When launched into life, the individual comes into contact with various circumstances in different relationships and thus constitutes himself as a relational being, existing because the other exists and perceiving himself because the

other perceives him. These relationships coexist as tools for the subject's self-perception, considering that the way he conducts them says a lot about his own essence. In search of it, in turn, he loses himself in search of protection mechanisms and it is by relating to himself that the individual finds the answers to his questions, including the mystery of his suffering.

Bringing contributions from the phenomenological perspective to psychosomatics and coping with chronic diseases, this study reflected on the conceptions based on the understanding of the human essence as possibilities of illness.

Thus, the relationship between body, mind and phenomenon are present in the dynamism of the subjects' existence and its measurement is not possible, but its description, just like the way it is shown to the subject.

The difficulty in collecting sources to carry out the theoretical foundation makes us realize the need to get in touch with chronic illness as a form of human existence to be understood through a holistic look from conditions that provide quality of life, as well as performing new research on the subject, reflecting on and seeking possibilities for forms of existence. ■

## REFERENCES

- Oliveira TPC, Lima KB, Freitas FGB. As doenças psicossomáticas como causa do câncer de mama em mulheres. *Revista Saúde & Ciência Online*. 2019; 8(2), 33-39.
- Silva JO, Ferreira SKA, Silva SF, Bergamini GB, Samuelsson E, Joner C et al. A correlação existente entre o estresse no ambiente de trabalho e doenças psicossomáticas. *Revista Científica da Faculdade de Educação e Meio Ambiente*. 2017, 8 (2), 177-191.
- Malta DC, Bernal RTI, Lima MG, Araújo SSC, Silva MMA, Freitas MIF et al. Doenças crônicas não transmissíveis e a utilização de serviços de saúde: análise da Pesquisa Nacional de Saúde no Brasil. *Revista de Saúde Pública [Internet]*. 2017 [cited 2021 Jan 18]; 51(Suppl 1): 4s. Available from: [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0034-89102017000200306&lng=en](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0034-89102017000200306&lng=en).
- Gomes W, Oliveira VZ. O Adolescer em Jovens Portadores de Doenças Orgânicas Crônicas. In: GOMES W. (Org.), *Fenomenologia e Pesquisa em Psicologia*. Porto Alegre: Editora da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 1998.
- Nascimento KP, Silva AK, Fonseca R, Moraes HCC. Doenças crônicas não transmissíveis e seus fatores de risco em quixadá/ce: rastreamento em diferentes grupos etários. *Encontro de Extensão, Docência e Iniciação Científica (EEDIC)*. 2019, 4(1).
- D'ávila JMC, Rocha FN. A Psicoterapia no Enfrentamento da Doença Psicossomática. *Revista Mosaico [Internet]*. 2019, 10(1Sup). [Cited 2021 Jan 18]. Available from: <http://editora.universidadedevassouras.edu.br/index.php/RM/article/view/1831>
- Husserl E. A ideia da fenomenologia. Ed. 70. Tradução por: Artur Morão. Lisboa: Edições 70, 2008. P. 20-80.
- Flick U. *Introdução à metodologia de pesquisa: Um guia para iniciantes*. Porto Alegre: Penso, 2013.
- Santos JW. A Vivência da Dor nas Práticas de Saúde Coletiva: implicações para a saúde da pessoa idosa. [Dissertation]. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Saúde Coletiva. Belo Horizonte: Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2016. 129f.
- Heidegger M. *Ser e tempo*. Parte I. 15 Ed. São Paulo: Editora Vozes, 2005. 309p.
- Feijoo AMLC, Mattar CM. A desconstrução da psicossomática na análise existencial de Heidegger e Boss. *Rev. latinoam. psicopatol. fundam.* [internet], São Paulo, 2015, 18 (4). 651-662. Available from <[http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1415-47142015000400651&lng=en&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1415-47142015000400651&lng=en&nrm=iso)>.
- Costa CS, Souza MA, Melo LL. Podendo ser si-mesmo: experiências de adolescentes com doenças crônicas de pele em acampamento. *Esc. Anna Nery [Internet]*. 2020 [cited 2021 Jan 19]; 24( 3 ): e20190333. Disponível em: [http://www.revenf.bvs.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1414-81452020000300214&lng=pt](http://www.revenf.bvs.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1414-81452020000300214&lng=pt).
- Silva MRO. O Sentido Atribuído à Experiência Da Comunicação Do Diagnóstico De Câncer Nos Discursos De Pessoas Idosas Sob a ótica Do Pensamento De Merleau-Ponty E Heidegger. [Thesis]. Faculdade de Psicologia. Amazonas: Universidade Federal do Amazonas, 2018. 91f.
- Dias AL. Convicções de saúde e câncer infantil: um estudo de familiares em casas de apoio. [Thesis]. Psicologia da Saúde. São Bernardo do Campo: Universidade Metodista de Sao Paulo, 2016.156f.
- Silva MHN. Fenomenologia Do Corpo Vivido Na Anorexia Nervosa. [Thesis]. Mestrado em Psicologia. Fortaleza: Universidade de Fortaleza, 2018. 175f.
- Brasileiro LEE. Estudo Da Associação Entre Síndrome Da Fragilidade E Depressão. [Thesis]. Centro de ciências da saúde. Natal: Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, 2017. 77f.
- Bicudo MAV. Sobre a fenomenologia. In: Bicudo MAV, Esposito MAV. *Pesquisa qualitativa em educação*. Piracicaba: Unimep, 1994. 15-22.
- Dantas JB. Corpo e existência: outro modo de compreensão da psicossomática. *Interação em Psicologia [internet]*, 2011, 15 (1). [Cited on 21 jan 19]. Available from: <https://revistas.ufpr.br/psicologia/article/view/16262>



**GRADUAÇÃO  
PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO  
TÉCNICO**

**ENFERMAGEM**

**saocamilo-sp.br**  
(11) 3465 2664  
ou 0300 017 8585



CENTRO UNIVERSITÁRIO  
**SÃO CAMILO**