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# Covid-19: impact on the mental health of the nursing team in the face of the pandemic

Covid-19: impacto na saúde mental da equipe de enfermagem frente à pandemia

Covid-19: impacto en la salud mental del equipo de enfermería ante la pandemia

## RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar o impacto da pandemia da COVID-19 na saúde mental da equipe de enfermagem. Método: Estudo descritivo-exploratório, transversal e quantitativo, com profissionais de enfermagem de quatro cidades da macrorregião sul de Minas Gerais. A coleta de dados foi realizada em abril e maio de 2021, através de um questionário com questões objetivas e uma subjetiva. Resultados: Observou-se uma relação expressiva entre a pandemia e os impactos causados na vida dos profissionais de enfermagem, que envolvem desde os impactos emocionais, como os reflexos prejudiciais nas relações conjugais, sociais, havendo muita conotação de medo por si e pelos outros, devido ao fato do risco de se contaminar, já que atuam na linha de frente no cuidado a pessoas contaminadas com COVID-19. Conclusão: Para enfrentar os desafios, é necessário que os profissionais da enfermagem sejam amparados psicologicamente para enfrentar as condições de trabalho atuais, geradoras de danos à saúde mental.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Enfermagem; Saúde Mental; COVID-19.

## ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the nursing team. Method: Descriptive-exploratory, cross-sectional and quantitative study with nursing professionals from four cities in the southern macro-region of Minas Gerais. Data collection was carried out in April and May 2021, through a questionnaire with objective and a subjective questions. Results: There was a significant relationship between the pandemic and the impacts caused in the lives of nursing professionals, which involve emotional impacts, such as harmful effects on marital and social relationships, with a lot of connotation of fear for themselves and for others, due to the fact of the risk of becoming contaminated, as they work on the front line in the care of people infected with COVID-19. Conclusion: To face the challenges, it is necessary that nursing professionals are psychologically supported to face current working conditions, which generate damage to mental health.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Nursing; Mental health; COVID-19.

## RESUMEN

Objetivo: Analizar el impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en la salud mental del equipo de enfermería. Método: Estudio descriptivo-exploratorio, transversal y cuantitativo con profesionales de enfermería de cuatro ciudades de la macrorregión sur de Minas Gerais. La recolección de datos se realizó en abril y mayo de 2021, a través de un cuestionario con preguntas objetivas y subjetivas. Resultados: Existió una relación significativa entre la pandemia y los impactos ocasionados en la vida de los profesionales de enfermería, los cuales involucran impactos emocionales, como efectos nocivos en las relaciones maritales y sociales, con mucha connotación de miedo para ellos mismos y para los demás, debido al hecho del riesgo de contaminarse, ya que trabajan en primera línea en la atención de personas infectadas con COVID-19. Conclusión: Para enfrentar los desafíos, es necesario que los profesionales de enfermería sean apoyados psicológicamente para enfrentar las condiciones laborales actuales, que generan daños a la salud mental.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Enfermería; Salud mental; COVID-19.

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## INTRODUCTION

The nursing profession requires a lot of training, as it requires characteristics that enable professionals to work in a troubled context, in which death is normally faced, the frustration of expectations about the patients' recovery and the fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, fear about their own health is also faced by professionals, given the biological risks and other factors that demand a very high emotional balance from professionals. 1,2

Added to the daily wear of the profession, many factors collaborate to generate unfavorable conditions of psychological and physical exhaustion that can compromise the efficiency of nurses' work. 3 Among these factors, the precarious working conditions and the high workload of these professionals stand out. 4

Schmidt et al. (2018) 5 emphasize the problems that can be triggered, considering the difficult conditions of a common work routine of the nursing professional, since it is possible to see how easy it is to cause stress at work. As a result, there is physical illness, which can have consequences such

as increased absenteeism, continuous indisposition, high turnover, low performance, among others. 2,6

From this perspective, when other critical factors are added to the work environment, the stress level can be even higher. As an example, we can mention the current pandemic, with the outbreak of the disease COVID-19, which can be an intense challenge not only for the demands of public health, but also for the mental health of nursing professionals. 7 This, in turn, has a high mortality rate in the world, due to the speed that the virus acts in the human body. Characterized as an existing subtype of Coronavirus, the new Coronavirus is identified as a disease causing Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). 2

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the mental health of health workers. 8,9 Lai et al. (2020) 10 evaluated health professionals from 34 hospitals in China with care for patients with COVID-19 and identified a significant number of depressive symptoms (50,4%), anxiety (44,6%) and insomnia (34%), with emphasis to nursing professionals. Similarly, Li et al. (2020) 11 reported that, among

health professionals, 50,7% developed depressive symptoms, 44,7% anxious symptoms, and 36,1% worsened in sleep.

Faced with the imminent risk and fear of dealing with a hitherto unknown situation, nurses and their team work under the pressure that the environment itself requires. In addition, the pressure it exerts on itself due to the fear of being contaminated and later transmitting it to family members and feeling "guilty" for the death of someone they love, causes stress and a consequent impact on the mental health of these professionals. 12 In this context, Dias et al. (2021) 13 observed some weaknesses in nursing professionals during the pandemic period, such as physical and mental exhaustion.

The survey of the nurses' mental condition is essential for the creation of specific intervention strategies. 9,14 Thus, this research aimed to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the nursing team.

## METHODS

This is a descriptive-exploratory, cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach.

ach. The study consisted of nursing professionals from four cities in the southern macro-region of Minas Gerais, according to the PDR/MG/2011 (Três Corações, Poços de Caldas, Passos and Guaxupé).

Inclusion criteria were: nursing professionals, from any training class, working for at least six months in the ICU-COVID segment. The exclusion criteria were nursing professionals working in other areas of the Hospital or in the general ICU. In the selected cities there are a total of 74 nursing professionals working in the ICU-COVID; therefore, considering a sample error of 10% and a confidence level of 95%, a sample of 34 professionals was obtained. They answered questionnaire 33, as one of them entered the exclusion criteria for working for less than six months in the ICU-COVID.

Data collection was carried out between April and May 2021, through a questionnaire prepared by the author herself, with objective questions, but with a subjective addendum to answer the participants' diagnosis, if any, and it was divided into two blocks. Block A dealt with questions related to the interviewees' knowledge of mental health and prevention. Block B contemplated questions about the professional's experience and personal experience in the COVID Intensive Care Unit (ICU) with an impact on mental health. The questionnaire link was sent to the responsible nurse technician through a digital platform. The research was validated after the participants read and agreed to sign the Free Informed Consent Form (FICF). For the analysis, statistics were performed with relative and absolute numbers, in a simple way and tabulated by Google Form, through excel document and graphics.

The present study complied with the precepts established by Resolution No. 466/12 of December 2012 and began after approval of the research pre-project by the Research Ethics Committee of the University Vale do Rio Verde - UNIN-COR (CEP), under the opinion CAAE 45755021.3.0000.5158.

## RESULTS

The questionnaire has two blocks, in addition to questions referring to the participants' personal data, which were applied in order to raise their sociodemographic relationship, and are included in table 1 below.

As exposed, it was asked if they knew what mental health was. All claim to know what mental health is, the result was the same when asked what mental disorders are. Asked about knowing prevention methods for mental disorders, the percentages

changed, but the positive answers remained, with only 18,2% denying knowing these methods.

In question 4, which ends block A, the question is directed to the mental health of the participants themselves, who should answer whether they have already been diagnosed or if they consider they have any mental or emotional disorder before the pandemic, and the majority (75,85%) answered no. Block B, in turn, consists of 16 questions that aim to identify the self-

Table 1 – Sociodemographic data

VARIABLE	ABSOLUTE VALUE	RELATIVE VALUE (%)
<b>CITY</b>		
Guaxupé	8	24,2
Passos	9	27,3
Poços de Caldas	10	30,3
Três Corações	6	18,2
<b>PROFESSION</b>		
Nurse	15	45,5
Nurse Technician	18	54,5
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	5	15,2
Female	28	84,8
<b>AGE GROUP</b>		
21 - 30	13	43,3
31 - 40	17	51,5
41 - 50	3	5,1
<b>TIME OF ACTION IN NURSING</b>		
6 m - 2 years	6	18,1
3 - 5 years	6	18,1
6 - 10 years	13	39,3
11 - 15 years	5	15,1
16 - 20 years	3	9,09
<b>LENGTH OF WORK AT THE COVID ICU</b>		
0 - 6 m	1	3,03
6 - 9 m	13	39,3
10 - 12 m	5	15,1
12 - 18 m	14	42,4

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2021.

-perception of nursing professionals about possible changes in quality of life after the onset of the pandemic.

Question 1 had the following command: Did you notice the occurrence of emotional changes when working on the front lines during the COVID-19 pandemic?, and question 2: Have you ever witnessed the death of patients infected by COVID-19? The results show the concerns highlighted throughout this research, as 90.9% claim to have had emotional changes after starting to develop professional activities during the pandemic period. While the experience of experiencing the death of patients from COVID-19 was 97%, as only one respondent had not witnessed any death from COVID until the time of the research.

Question number 03 asks if there is a support network for nursing professionals in the workplace, in which more than half of the participants (54,5%) said there was no support network. When answering question 04 of the form, which asks whether they consider they need psychological help to work on fighting the pandemic, just over half answered yes, totaling 52%. Even so, 69,7% responded that there was no decline in work performance, compared to 30,3% who considered the mental disturbances so intense that they felt worse at work compared to the previous pandemic situation, in which the anxieties and fears were not as evident as it is at the moment.

Asked if they believe in the possibility of having developed some emotional/mental disorder in the pandemic, 45,5% (according to survey data) answered yes, against 51,5%. Although it seems a balanced percentage, it is important to emphasize that if half of the professionals, according to their reports, develop severe mental health disorders, the assistance to the population in the work units where they provide assistance may be impaired. When asked about having perceived negative impacts on their social relationships during the pandemic, the majority (72,7%) answered yes. As for marital relationships, the percentage of participants who felt impacts on their rela-

tionships and relationships with their spouses was 54,5%, but even so, it is more than half of them.

Participants were also asked if they felt or felt panic when thinking about the possibility of becoming infected with COVID, where 54,5% answered yes. Although 45,45% reported not being afraid of being contaminated by COVID until the date of the survey, the answer was unanimous regarding the fear of contaminating family members, adding up to 100% of the positive responses. This data demonstrates that professionals on the front line do not fear for their own lives, but live with the fear of contaminating a family member, which could even lead to death.

When asked if working under the risk of contamination would have been harmful to the nurses' mental health, 51,5% answered yes. The same question referring to co-workers, in turn, had a much higher positive response rate, where 78,8% said they believed that working under the risk of contamination was harmful to the mental health of co-workers. It was asked whether the participants observed in their co-workers characteristics that they did not have before the pandemic, such as changes in behavior or income level, where 87,7% answered yes, which reinforces the idea that they hardly notice these characteristics in itself, but which may perhaps be noticed in the other.

Regarding the diagnosis, 97% report not having had any diagnosis of mental disorder after starting to provide nursing care in the pandemic, however, of these 94%, at least three participants admit that they have not sought any psychological help capable of diagnosing possible disorders, even feeling fear, sadness and a lot of stress, making this percentage uncertain. Among the 3% who claimed to have had diagnoses of disorders, they referred to diagnoses of anxiety crises and feelings of deep sadness that refer to signs of emotional changes, as reported by the participants. At the end of the results of this research, question 16 brought the following question: "Do you believe it is important to have psycholog-

ical support for nursing professionals during the pandemic?" and 100% answered yes.

## DISCUSSION

The sociodemographic data show that the majority are women, totaling 84,8% and as demonstrated in this research, other authors also report that nursing has been a predominantly female profession for a long time. 15 It should be noted that women are the absolute majority in professions and occupations that directly refer to the care of individuals, and are naturally emotionally exposed to emotional damage and that can be intensified by the gender dynamics that occur in today's society. 16

Environment and external factors such as lifestyle habits, exposure to certain situations can contribute to triggering mental disorders. Bermudez (2018) 17 brings the Cognitive Behavior Therapy technique, which consists of helping people to learn to identify, explore and modify the relationship between their thoughts, behaviors and mood states, which are directly related to circumstances in life, in this case, the pandemic.

It is also noteworthy that fear, uncertainty, insecurity and risk are constant confrontations by the nursing team, who deal with the internal and external pressure of their profession. 18 With the discovery of the virus, various information and training programs were released to professionals, but working conditions did not keep pace. 19

Regarding the damage to family and marital relationships caused by the virus, nursing professionals are prone to these damages, due to the workload and emotional load interfering with mood. 20 Fear is a common feeling related to nursing care during the pandemic, when non-inmates are related to third parties and always present, and this fear, misinformation and other feelings caused can generate stress and harm the mental health of professionals. 1

The risk of mental illness, as discussed throughout this research, is certainly increased due to the uncertain work envi-



ronment, living with the death of patients under their care, among many other factors that generate anxiety, reducing the quality of life and impacting on mental health. 21 There is also a relationship of denial, considering that when it comes to admitting problems related to mental health, it is natural for people to assume a denial and defensive posture, because it is comforting for the person to deny reality, as this avoids the confrontation of stressful situations. 22

As these feelings are common at the time of the pandemic, mental health care is essential and requires efforts that must involve everyone, and this care is emerging. 23 In this context, studies show that anxiety and depression have been more common in nursing during the pandemic period, as

well as insomnia; a series of conditions that bring emotional shocks, because despite the need for resilience being known by nursing professionals, acting in the pandemic requires more difficult patterns of emotional resistance. 24

## CONCLUSION

It was found that the conditions resulting from the pandemic were characterized as generating impacts on the lives of respondents. Although the diagnoses related to mental health have not been highly representative in the approach of this research, some limitations can be considered as compromising the result in this analysis, such as the lack of search by participants for

specialized medical care from mental health professionals, even though all participants considered psychological counseling necessary to work during the pandemic.

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