


## Effects of Covid-19 on mental health: rescuing human dignity through affection\*

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Before the Covid-19 pandemic, in the university environment we faced constant requests for help from students with psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, depression, bipolar and obsessive-compulsive disorders, schizophrenia, etc., as well as emotional distress, such as fears, anguish, loneliness, helplessness, existential problems, a feeling of uprooting, despair. In March 2020, the face-to-face activities of the University of São Paulo were suspended due to the pandemic, but remote activities allowed the institution not to stop and continue its action in teaching, research and psychological care activities.

The Covid-19 pandemic generates an unprecedented stress factor and a need to support patients with severe mental diseases, as it is difficult to maintain healthy habits such as diet and physical activity, or self-control of chronic mental and physical health conditions. The increase in anxiety and depression can generate a risk of loneliness and isolation in the more vulnerable population and also in health professionals, especially if the pandemic is long-lasting<sup>(1)</sup>. Given this scenario, researchers recommend multidisciplinary work with high investment in research<sup>(2)</sup> and coordinated action<sup>(3)</sup>, that pay attention to the consequences for vulnerable groups.

Some effects of Covid-19 that impact on mental health<sup>(4)</sup>: fear of being contaminated and contaminating others, triggering acute stress reactions; need for quarantine, change of routine and confinement culminate in feelings of helplessness, boredom, anxiety, anguish, irritability and anger at the loss of freedom; mourning, depression in the face of deaths without farewell rituals can increase suicide risk; those admitted in ICUs can develop severe depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric conditions in the future; and economic and job losses can turn acute stress into chronic, increasing the risk for mental disorders. When

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anguish or depression are uncontrollable, or impact on other aspects of life, such as family or professional function, it is necessary to seek professional help.

From the project on suicide among university students: clinical and phenomenological study of guidance, prevention and therapy (FAPESP), in the welcomings and Conversation Circles, both in-person and virtual, at the Mental Health Office of the Undergraduate Dean of the USP, we constructed knowledge derived from shared experiences with the community. In this experience, we embrace human complexity: pain, anguish, fear, despair, mourning, hope and lack of it, what is different, tiredness, demotivation. Facing a society where virtual and technological communication predominates, we reflect on the importance of a basic education that includes finitude (death), frustration and mourning as processes inherent to life that need to be discussed and looked after in dialog with health professionals so that personalities mature, as well as the spiritual dimension, strengthening the fight against the health crisis situation.

Innovative, interdisciplinary and international perspectives are welcome. Philosophy helps us to expand reflections, as it is a science that deals with love for wisdom, experienced only by human beings who are aware of their own ignorance<sup>(5)</sup>. We have a scientific and humanistic culture and, within them, two important disciplines, Psychology and Psychopathology, which refer to the human and to the pathologies of the psyche, and neither one can be totally abandoned to the natural sciences, being opportune, in fact, to assume a critical attitude in relation to each reductionist position of human beings to one of their aspects<sup>(6)</sup>.

It is important to recognize that, at the base of the humanistic culture, of the biological and exact sciences, there are human beings and their dignity. Science means knowing and cannot be reduced to the paradigm of natural, physical and organic sciences, since we have the human sciences, whose mystery of the human being will never be explained, but understood, respected and tolerated. Thus, we will be able to help others in their integrity and complexity, not excluding, but working in integration and partnership.

We live in a unique moment in the history of mankind, in which we would need to join forces and skills, to help humanity and society together, admitting the limits and scopes of each discipline, welcoming the different, the strange, the other, reducing all personal and social prejudice and stigma.

We are human beings, not robots or passively determined machines. We are affected by others and by the life that dwells in us. In affection I am born with others<sup>(7)</sup>. Being affected is not a weakness or negativity, but the possibility of a relationship. In affect we find the strength and dynamism of culture renewal, in its multiple dimensions: economic, political, aesthetic, all of which are deeply affected by this universal crisis.


In order to combat part of the difficulties resulting from the pandemic, it is useful to look for those that we intuitively feel can help us, because seeking help is a gesture of wisdom, whose action expands understanding, elaboration and the search for a new meaning for life. The daily experience in welcoming students from the University of São Paulo shows us that they want to express their feelings without being judged, without prejudice or moralism, so that they yearn to find relationships that return to them a feeling of belonging to the human world and thus being able to rescue their dignity and hopes for affect and mutual recognition.

Young people yearn to be known, getting out of isolation, shyness and to control their anxieties and sorrows. Pedagogical and personal care is vital in their university and human education, but they call for certain care continuity and recognition of their personal and community importance. It is necessary to believe in the power of the understanding, sensitive and interested relationship for the other, because a significant relationship generates marks in the life of the young adult, showing that the main antidote to combat the psychological effects of the pandemic is the balanced, supportive and truly interested interpersonal relationship for our fellows, confident in their capacity for resilience and coping.

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