

OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: Goal: Discuss the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for psychiatric patients already diagnosed and also later identified with obsessive-compulsive disorder, seeking to show if and when there was a worsening of their symptoms. **Method:** Bibliographic review developed in the months of October and November 2022. The searches were carried out through searches in the PubMed and SciELO databases. The descriptors “obsessive-compulsive disorders”, “COVID-19 pandemic”, “mental disorders” were used. A total of 1059 articles were found. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 16 articles were selected. **Discussion:** OCD is a disorder marked by obsessions and compulsions. Despite the different opinions in the literature about how such restrictions and new norms of conduct may have affected individuals with OCD, panic symptoms and even suicidal ideation were found to be a common complaint during this period among patients with psychiatric conditions with a relative worsening of its symptomatology. **Final Considerations:** It can be concluded, therefore, that the COVID-19 pandemic was a factor that negatively influenced those with a pre-existing diagnosis of OCD and caused the development of this pathology by a large part of the population.

Keywords: Transtorno Obsessivo-Compulsivo; Pandemia de COVID-19; Transtornos Psiquiátricos.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was and has been a worsening factor for individuals with existing psychiatric illnesses, given that an increase in the risk of relapses or worsening of the mental health condition was observed as an effect of the necessary isolation (PAN K.Y. et al., 2021; LIU W. et al., 2020). This movement was also associated with a distrust on the part of doctors towards the masses,

resulting in a lower use of health facilities, followed also by a significant decrease in the management of pre-diagnosed health conditions, also including the area of mental health. (HAMZA-SHUJA K. et al., 2020).

For these reasons, it is pertinent to relate the current pandemic with the search for a diagnosis of mental disorders, especially obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) due to its relevance at the aforementioned moment (HASSOULAS A. et al., 2021). OCD is characterized as a psychiatric condition that begins during the young-adult phase, with a prevalence of 2 to 3% in the world population, and whose main symptoms are obsessive-compulsive thoughts or acts that generate significant suffering (HAMZA- SHUJA K. et al., 2020).

The feeling of fear in the context of a pandemic caused by confinement strategies altered social and emotional aspects of the general population and, consequently, caused the development of psychological problems, whether in patients with pre-existing disorders or not (JAKOVLJEVIC M. et al, 2020). The obsession for fear of contamination, the discomfort generated by cleaning, together with the constant obligation to wash and sterilize, are commonly classified as examples of the symptoms that characterize the reasons for the emergence and components of the routine of patients diagnosed with OCD (HAMZA-SHUJA K. et al., 2020).

In this perspective, new manifestations of mental disorders, in particular OCD, are still present in the daily lives of survivors of the pandemic, making the present study relevant, which aims to discuss the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the isolation and social dynamics that accompanied her, for psychiatric patients already diagnosed and also later identified with OCD, in an attempt to show whether such factors could be related to their progressive worsening.

METHODOLOGY

This is a bibliographical review developed in the months of October and November 2022, according to the criteria of the PVO strategy, an acronym that represents: population or research problem, variables and outcome. Used to prepare the research through its guiding question: “What was the implication of the pandemic and social isolation caused by COVID-19, in the manifestation and worsening of obsessive-compulsive disorder in the general population?”. According to the parameters mentioned above, the population or problem of this research refers to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the isolation and social dynamics that accompanied it, for psychiatric patients already diagnosed and also later identified with OCD, seeking to highlight if and when there was progressive worsening of these. The searches were carried out through searches in the PubMed Central (PMC) and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) databases. The descriptors were used in combination with the Boolean term “AND” and “OR” “: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders, COVID-19 pandemic, Mental Disorders. Inclusion criteria were: articles in English and Portuguese; published in the period from 2020 to 2022 and that addressed the themes proposed for this research, studies of the type (review, meta-analysis, cohort, cross-sectional), available in full. Exclusion criteria were: duplicate articles, available in summary form, which did not directly address the studied proposal and which did not meet the other inclusion criteria. After associating the descriptors used in the searched databases, a total of 1059 articles were found. Of which, 1019 articles belonged to the PubMed database and 40 articles to Scielo. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 15 articles were selected from the PubMed database

and 1 article from Scielo, using a total of 16 studies to compose the collection.

REVIEW

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 brought harmful effects to the mental health of the population worldwide. The fear caused by the symptomatology of the disease, its mortality rate, the isolation and quarantine measures imposed, media actions and also the poor administration of the health system in the face of the unknown situation were contributors to the breakdown of social and health structures (JAKOVLJEVIC M. et al., 2020). As a result, the exacerbation of psychiatric symptoms was potentiated in psychiatric patients, who in many cases were not assisted (KOK A.L.A. et al., 2021).

OCD is a disorder marked by obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are intrusive, unwanted, and disturbing thoughts. While compulsions are rituals referring to such thoughts. For example, an individual with OCD may perform the bathing ritual several times due to obsessive thoughts about contamination. Such patients suffer from severe psychic suffering as they seek to ignore such symptoms, since they fear the process of pathologizing their own thoughts associated with the feeling of shame or even normalization in the face of the present moment (ORNELL F. et al, 2021; FONTENELLE L., MIGUEL E., 2020).

According to Davide P. et al. (2020), the quarantine was of paramount importance to reduce the risk of infections, however, it increased psychic suffering both in healthy individuals and in those who already had a primary disorder. During this period, it was possible to notice the worsening of anxiety, including OCD as an aggravating factor of anxious events. Excessive concern for family members and oneself was found to be important triggers (LINDE E.S. et al., 2022;

ABBA-AJI A. et al., 2020).

Liao J. (2021) identified in his study that individuals with a good level of resilience and adaptation to major changes tend to suffer less disorders or changes when molding themselves to the environment, which was observed in the context of isolation. However, individuals who have less adaptability had a high probability of developing psychological disorders. However, the level of resilience is a component that is not very specific and sensitive, as it can vary according to the sociocultural experience of each individual, but its influence and importance is made explicit when it is verified that the pandemic was a dystopia with a stage for the scenario of suicides associated with various underlying mental disorders (KHOSRAVANI V. et al., 2021).

For Fontenelle L.F. et al. (2021) among the various risk factors that may favor the development of OCD, stressful life or traumatic events stand out. Bearing in mind that the pandemic has led to significant changes in the dynamics and quality of life, it is clear that there is an increase in the prevalence of individuals who have not only symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, but also obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, also aggravating several already diagnosed disorders.

OCD may be associated with other concomitant symptoms, in which they were more likely to develop varying degrees of pre-existing stress, depression and increased anxiety. Such an association of psychic illnesses was observed in the study by Grante J.E. et al. (2021), who identified that depression and OCD are commonly found together, and depression can worsen OCD symptoms.

According to Jellinek L. et al. (2021), contradictory, individuals with OCD tend to suffer less negative effects from the pandemic, in situations where it was possible to establish a

more rigorous routine in the face of a stressful environment. In other words, prophylactic measures to spread the SARS-CoV-2 virus also acted as a ritual for OCD patients, making them adapt more easily. The more ritualistic such a routine was, the better the emotional balance of the patient subject to it would be. However, the negative stressful events were also enough to potentiate the internal conflicts of each individual, culminating in the development of other disorders added to OCD.

By contrast, Linde E.S. et al. (2020) states that COVID-19, brought a negative psychosocial impact on the mental health of individuals, especially those already diagnosed with OCD, who already saw themselves in a situation of constant danger, in the face of pre-existing viruses and germs, passed to a situation of extreme vulnerability. Recommendations encouraged by health organizations on cleaning, hygiene and contact restrictions, for the majority of society, seemed to be common care and not so recurrent, but which must be reinforced. However, for compulsives, it became a problem, as it reaffirmed all the greatest fears of an individual with this disorder: unbridled contamination (LINDE E.S. et al., 2022).

Excessive hand washing was the most prevalent symptom among the analyzed sample of individuals with OCD, according to the Linde E.S. et al. (2022). Furthermore, the analysis by Grant J.E. et al. (2021), demonstrated that restrictions at the beginning of the pandemic were what considerably aggravated mental health conditions in this already susceptible population. The most severe cases reported were symptoms of panic and suicidal attempt or ideation. The truth is that the fear these individuals attributed to viruses and germs are seen as a threat to themselves. There is a concern that they are being incorrect if

they do not adopt protective, cleaning and hygiene care behaviors, and this is what leads them to compulsiveness and irrational attitudes. There was a sense of verification and encouragement during the pandemic, as the similar behaviors were all the time being encouraged by the media, doctors and health experts (LINDE E.S. et al., 2022).

Due to the emergency framework at the time of the pandemic, it became difficult to identify certain disorders throughout the pandemic. For those who had been previously diagnosed, seeking treatment and monitoring the disease became a challenge. For those undiagnosed but who developed OCD during this period, distinguishing a disorder from a valid concern at the time proved even more complicated. Therefore, these factors may have been the main contributors to the increase in symptoms (LINDE E.S. et al., 2022; GRANT J.E. et al., 2021).

According to Liu W. et al. (2021), there are four aspects that differentiate the treatment of OCD before and during the pandemic, namely: the increase in anxiety in the social, economic and political environment; the restriction of communication between physicians and patients due to the possible closure of treatment centers; the alteration of the forms of social interaction and the living environment; and finally, temporary absence from work. Family support and therapies are of great importance for the evolution of patients with OCD, as their caregivers, as well as their support network, tend to have an increased risk of developing stress-related pathologies, due to the symptomatology common to the disorder.

Telemedicine and social networks were tools that contributed to bringing mental health teams and patients closer together, enabling the application of cognitive behavioral therapy, since therapy is a treatment option for patients with OCD,

in which it was necessary to remodel guidelines given to patients who report fear of contamination and body washing rituals and their environment (FONTENELLE L., MIGUEL E., 2020). According to Carmi L. et al. (2021), treatment with cognitive behavioral therapy must be continued in patients with OCD and there is also a need for further studies exploring the long-term effects of the pandemic on such patients. Mental health teams must still apply forms of relapse prevention in patients with OCD, since the effects generated by the pandemic context on the affected population are still uncertain (LIU W. et al., 2021).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The various restrictions to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus have led, in particular to patients already diagnosed with OCD, to an exacerbation of degerming and cleaning rituals, already common to the disorder. Despite the different opinions in the literature around how such restrictions and new norms of conduct may have affected individuals with OCD. However, a difficulty in diagnosing OCD during the pandemic was differentiating a disorder from a valid concern at the time, with the monitoring of such patients being of paramount importance in order to assess the course of the disorder and alleviate the difficulties of reintegration of these individuals. The need for further studies is evident with the aim of recording the evolution of the disorder in such a portion of the population in order to obtain greater knowledge about the impacts of restrictive measures and organize therapeutic plans that allow their reintegration into society.

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