

## THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE ELDERLY AND STRATEGIES FOR COPING

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**Abstract: Introduction:** COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. On the 11/03/2020th, the state of a pandemic was declared, with that, several security measures were adopted by governments around the world. These measures impacted the behavior patterns of individuals, especially the elderly population, generating fragility in physical and mental health. **Objective:** To understand, through a literature review, how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of the elderly, as well as to report possible coping strategies in the face of social isolation. **Methods:** A literature review was carried out, searching for articles in the Scielo, Medline, BVS and Pubmed databases, using the descriptors: Mental Health, Elderly (Aged) and COVID-19. The selected articles were those that answered the guiding question, with publication time between 2020 and 2021, with Qualis above B3 and in Portuguese. **Results:** Articles were selected (Scielo = 2, Medline = 4, BVS = 2 and Pubmed = 4), from the eligible sample based on the title and abstract, 6 studies were excluded because they did not fit the theme addressed. In this literature review, 12 articles were considered and the reasons for excluding the others were not responding to the specific theme. **Conclusions:** With the articles used in the present study, it can be seen that, with social isolation, which is a measure to contain the COVID-19 virus, one of the most affected populations was the elderly. The pandemic was a factor with the greatest potential impact on the mental health of this class, causing loneliness, depression and anxiety, as well as, through it, they were able to carry out some activities that they did not want to or did not know how to do before. **Keywords:** Social isolation; Coronavirus; Depression; Loneliness.

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, the Chinese authorities confirmed the origin of a new type of coronavirus, initially identified as 2019-nCoV, later named SARS-CoV-2, responsible for the first outbreak of respiratory disease in Wuhan, province of Hubei, China (World Health Organization, 2020).

Currently, there is no certainty about the origin of the virus that caused the pandemic. However, according to Lam et al., (2020) there is a hypothesis that relates the bat as a reservoir of SARS-CoV-2, transmitted to humans through pangolins. Such a possibility is based on the fact that the SARS-CoV-like coronavirus was detected in the pangolin lung sample (LIU; CHEN; CHEN, 2019).

The World Health Organization declared, on March 11, 2020, a state of pandemic and with that, social isolation measures were adopted in order to mitigate all the impacts that the world was facing. Such measures include isolating cases, encouraging hand hygiene, prohibiting mass events and gatherings, restricting travel and public transport, and raising public awareness to understand the pandemic scenario since then (AQUINO et al, 2021).

In view of this, social restriction turns out to be the most effective measure to prevent the spread of the disease, and its clinical and behavioral repercussions imply changes in lifestyle and can affect the mental health of citizens, in this case mainly the elderly, which was one of the most affected classes in this period. Regarding lifestyles, social restriction can lead to a significant reduction in physical activity levels of moderate to vigorous intensity, and an increase in time spent in sedentary behavior (AQUINO et al., 2021).

Regarding the mental health of the elderly, most of them had comorbid factors associated with a higher risk of developing the severe form of COVID-19. Where, in the absence of

an emotional balance at that moment, quite increasing numbers of cases of depression, suicides originated from feelings of loneliness, anxiety and sadness, concerns about the shortage of supplies, in addition to the concern if they would survive this scenario (ROMERO et al., 2021).

Therefore, a close look at the psychic vulnerability of the elderly is necessary so that it is understood that the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened inequality by affecting the most vulnerable. Therefore, the objective of this research was to understand, through a literature review, how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of the elderly, as well as to report possible coping strategies in the face of social isolation.

## METHODS

This research is a literature review on the theme of the mental health of the elderly in consequences arising from the period of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis allows the search for different social behaviors of the elderly in the face of the pandemic and the reflection and synthesis of the available scientific literature. This study provides a broad analysis of the literature on the specific topic that will contribute to the development and conclusions on the topic addressed.

Thus, the following steps were used for elaboration: (01) definition of the theme, (02) definition of the descriptors to be used, and determination of the databases (03) establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria, (04) reading of the selected articles and (5) construction of the review.

The theme was chosen based on the following guiding question: how did the pandemic affect the mental health of the elderly? To find the content corresponding to the objectives, the following search terms (descriptors) were used: Mental Health,

Elderly (Aged); Covid-19. The descriptors were selected in the health sciences descriptors (DeCS) and 6227 articles were found. For the construction of this study, articles were searched in different databases: VHL (Medline), Pubmed and Scielo. The survey took place in October 2021.

The selected articles followed the following inclusion criteria: Articles with Qualis above B3; with publication time between 2020 and 2021, in the Portuguese language. Articles that addressed mental health in groups other than the elderly, articles with publication dates prior to the year 2020, articles that were not written in Portuguese and repeated articles were excluded. After analyzing the selected articles, based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 12 articles were used as the basis for the construction of this review. There were no disagreements between reviewers about the inclusion of manuscripts, both agreed with which studies met the necessary elements for the development of the theme addressed.

## RESULTS

Twelve articles were selected from the following databases: Scielo = 2, Medline = 4, BVS = 2, Pubmed = 4.

Of 18 selected articles, 6 articles were excluded because they were repeated or did not fit the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which are articles in English and articles that did not address the specific topic of this integrative review article.

The study was conducted in Portuguese and is a literature review. The main studies found based on our chosen theme were reporting the mental health of the elderly, loneliness due to the pandemic, depression and anxiety and how they took advantage of the pandemic to do activities that they did not practice before.

## DISCUSSION

### THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE ELDERLY

In view of the pandemic scenario provided by Covid-19 and the protective measures established by the World Health Organization with a focus on physical and social distancing to control the spread of the virus, the objective of mitigating the impacts on the health of the elderly population due to their vulnerability is observed. immunological. However, the impairment of diseases related to the mental health of this public is notorious (SANTOS; BRANDÃO; ARAÚJO, 2020). According to Canali and Scortegagna (2021), despite cultural differences, some signs and symptoms that affect the mental health of the elderly around the world are similar, so it is important to discuss these issues.

According to Santos and Dantas (2020), socially isolated individuals are more likely to have mental disorders due to deprivation and social restraint. During the pandemic, sudden changes in routine, little knowledge of the disease and fear of being infected, these anxieties are potentiated by generating symptoms of psychic suffering, especially those related to stress, anxiety and depression. This situation becomes more delicate when there is already a clinical history of mental disorders.

Among the feelings triggered during the pandemic, loneliness, anxiety and sadness were the most frequent among this audience, especially women. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened inequality by affecting the most vulnerable elderly. This situation is justified by the composition of the family, where many live alone (HAMMERSCHMIDT & SANTANA, 2020). Furthermore, social vulnerability, especially poverty, increased the risk of illness for some elderly people. The

economic impact of the pandemic has led to increased unemployment and economic losses, further reducing access to income and services (NABUCO; OLIVEIRA; AFONSO, 2020).

According to Romero et al, (2021) there was a decrease in income in almost half of the elderly households. The pandemic scenario emphasizes the health of the elderly and encourages the need for protection, respect, care, dignity and support networks. There is a need to plan and implement strategies to mitigate loneliness and social distancing, taking into consideration, social vulnerability and the marked difference between men and women in terms of family composition, as well as socioeconomic conditions.

According to Hammerschmidt and Santana (2020), remote protection operations must maintain the autonomy and independence of the elderly, and professionals need to have specific knowledge of this group of people. The pandemic moment reinforced the need for Gerontological Care, stable, qualified and safe nursing, through basic professional training, it is necessary to reformulate care actions for the elderly, respect diversity and look at current and future scenarios.

### **STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLNESS OF THE ELDERLY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

To know that isolation / social distance is an emotional challenge for this group, it is necessary to develop a mechanism that helps the elderly to survive the pandemic more calmly (NEVES et al., 2021). It is worth mentioning that according to several authors (COSTA et al., 2021; Gustavsson & Beckman, 2020; Sun et al., 2020) the digital inclusion of the elderly and the use of technologies help to improve the mental health of this group, as they reduce the impact of feelings of loneliness

and social isolation, and allow them to interact with friends and family.

Social interaction and maintaining contacts make it possible for the elderly to understand that digital technologies are necessary useful tools that can be used by them. This perception awakens the feeling of autonomy and helps to reduce digital exclusion and the stigma of ageism in the use of technologies, through access to these intergenerational forms (Sun et al., 2020; Rolandi et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the design and handling of many devices are seen as complex and limiting, which often makes learning difficult for the elderly, but one must not give up teaching them. The elderly need to feel the need to use technology, and for that it needs to be useful in their daily lives. Thus, it is necessary to pay attention that this group must be taught differently. (Moraes, 2014).

According to Almeida & Sussumu (2020), it is important to develop projects aimed at the digital inclusion of the elderly, focusing on mastering the main tools of information and communication technologies. Thus, the city of Santos-SP can be highlighted, a reference for the creation of the digital inclusion teaching center for the elderly (BRANDÃO, 2019).

Furthermore, to facilitate accessibility to this equipment, considering the high cost, government measures can be created aiming at an incentive program through connectivity assistance and the acquisition of devices for low-income groups. Similar strategies have already been developed in the United States, where more than 80% of elderly people have access to the internet, due to the great digital incentive for this group. Thus, this strategy can be replicated in other countries, since in periods of a pandemic such as the one that occurs in 2020, technology seems to be the only alternative to meet the needs of the population, without disrespecting social isolation. (SANTOS, BRANDÃO, ARAÚJO,

2020).

As a means of facilitating the search for digital media, which contribute to the social isolation of the elderly, the study by Banskota, Healy, Goldberg (2020), showed cell phone applications available on the Play Store, which were characterized by ease of use and the needs of the elderly restricted to their homes. These were categorized into: Social Networks, Medical, Health and Fitness, Food and Drink, Visual and Auditory; although they are not included in all countries, they serve as a model for meaningful and comprehensive strategies for the elderly, aimed at their independence and harm reduction during isolation. In addition, according to Rodriguez, Crespo & Olmedillas (2020), the practice of resilience and physical activity are considered protective factors for the prevention of mental illness, because they can contribute to health and stress relief.

During the period of isolation resulting from the pandemic, a sedentary lifestyle is almost inevitable and this has harmful effects on cardiovascular functions, intensifying problems such as hypertension, which is common in the elderly. The authors also emphasize that specialists suggest the improvement of international guidelines for the practice of physical and aerobic exercises for situations like this, which can be performed with the help of applications and portable devices that monitor and evaluate activities at home. (SANTOS, BRANDÃO, ARAÚJO, 2020). Thus, Pavani, et al., (2020) highlights the need to develop government policies and general guidelines; production of information and exchange and care practices in mental health.

## CONCLUSION

The different articles used in this study, which had as their object of investigation the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the elderly, pointed loneliness and the change of routine as the main stressors of this public. Such factors were added to increased levels of anxiety, fear of being contaminated, uncertainties regarding the disease and frequent news in the media. The association of the aforementioned factors may favor the appearance of several psychological disorders, including depression.

The results also demonstrate the need to develop mechanisms that help the elderly to survive the pandemic more peacefully, avoiding risks to mental health. The authors highlight the digital inclusion of this public, as well as encouraging the development of physical activities at home through specific applications for this public. Finally, the authors also highlight the importance of establishing government measures that can be created with a view to encouraging connectivity and the acquisition of devices for low-income groups.

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