

Chapter 20

Emotional and Psychological Effects of the COVID–19 Pandemic in College Students: A Language Exchange Project as a Tool to Manage Psychological Disorders Related to the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has altered the mental health of the global population. The fear of getting sick, combined with other factors from a healthcare crisis—fear of losing loved ones, social isolation, unemployment, uncertainty about the future, etc.—have created the perfect environment for a greater development of psychological health disorders. All sectors of society are being affected by these changes, including above all, college students. The aim of this chapter is to observe the specific disorders college students may develop and what teachers can do about them. A language exchange project will be proposed as an integrated and preventive tool. It will also constitute a resource for eventual mental health disorders management. The combination of these two realities—mental health and education—should work as the basis for further investigation on integrated projects.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the imminence of the facts, there is a considerable number of studies pointing their attention to the research of emotional and psychological effects linked to the lock-down and the pandemic crisis. On this new configuration of social and professional life, the way to interact with others and develop daily activities —both professional and personal— has undergone many important changes. Many of the activities that people used to do in person – involving physical contact, are now no longer permitted, or

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they had to be adapted to a virtual space. This transition from physical presence to online connections has been especially paradigmatic in the context of education. All levels of instruction had the duty of adapting their activity to the virtual communication at some point. In many cases, as the one highlighted in this paper—universities in Italy have been closed from March until September, and now in Turin there is a situation of blended-teaching, combining both face-to-face and online courses—, all the instruction had to be swiftened from one method to the other. Such radical change, had no room for adaptation. The situation has indeed constituted a huge challenge for the university community as a whole —students, professors, researchers, families, etc.— The main objective of this work, is to study some of those effects, especially those related to social isolation and anxiety in college students, and make a proposal of activities that can help students to better manage those issues.

Many researchers pointed their attention to the effects of the pandemic crisis on the psychological health of different collectives. In this paper, the author wanted to focus on the psychological effects mainly derived from social isolation in college students, starting from the study and observation of different researches that have already been done in this field. The results provided by the work of Cao, Fang, Hou *et al.* (2020) were found to be specially interesting. Researchers in that paper have applied a questionnaire based in the 7-Item Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) to college students from the University of Changzhi, in China. This questionnaire measured the level of anxiety of the students revealing some of the factors related to it —economic situation, gender, origin of the students, etc.—. According to this research, 25% of the consulted students have suffered from mild or severe anxiety levels during the pandemic. Between the factors that influenced those levels of anxiety we found that social isolation was one of the main ones: *«It is known that anxiety disorders are more likely to occur and worsen in the absence of interpersonal communication.»* (Cao, Fang, Hou *et al.* 2020, 3). Many other studies concur in the fact that social isolation and pandemic crisis had and are still having a big impact in the anxiety levels of college students around the world (Aucejo *et al.* 2020; Son *et al.* 2020, Xiao 2020, Wang *et al.* 2020; Yang 2020).

The students involved in the project researched in this paper, have a specific profile, very similar to the profiles of students exposed in the above-mentioned research. The project was addressed to young adults that are following higher studies —most of them in the languages and linguistics field—with different social and economic status, origin and gender.

This project was originally born with the main goal of improving the linguistic and cultural competence of students in Catalan language and culture. The initial idea was to create an online language exchange project, in order to give them the possibility of experiencing a linguistic immersion among peers. The didactic experiences among peers have proved to be very effective as online language learning experiences, creating learning contexts with numerous characteristics that are a guarantee of language teaching success —equality among students, contact with native speakers, social interaction, significant learning, etc.— (Belz & Thorne, 2006; García, Rey, & Rosado, 2009; Guadamillas Gómez, 2017; Tudini, 2007).

The commitment as teachers has transcended the limits of traditional education. Professionals no longer limit the teaching to the physical space of the classroom; they are entering —virtually—in student's private spaces in a moment of stress and anxiety for everyone. They may be going through complicated personal situations linked to the pandemic crisis: ill family members, financial problems, social isolation, etc. The role as teachers is limited, because they don't have all the competences required to give professional psychological support. The authors are completely aware of the importance of professional mental health intervention on those situations, but experience has shown that the lack of awareness about mental health as well as the lack of psychological intervention possibilities among

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