

Psychological Impact of COVID-19 Quarantine on Nursing Students in Portugal and Spain

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The current Covid-19 pandemic has forced Portugal and Spain, like other countries, to implement a set of actions to preserve life. The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, so apparently simple in its structure yet so complex in its consequences, suspended social life, imposing a transformative process at all levels. In these countries, in March 2020, a state of emergency was declared and public services, commerce, and schools were closed. People were “forced” to stay at home, quarantined.

In addition to the fear of infecting and getting infected, of dying and losing loved ones, and to the insecurity and uncertainty about the future, citizens have now to deal with the loss of freedom and isolation as well.

Scientific evidence shows that the compulsory confinement can impact the psychological well-being of individuals by triggering stress, boredom, isolation, nervousness, sadness, changes in mood, confusion, fear of becoming infected, changes in sleep, among others [1]. A cross-sectional study carried out in 194 cities in China [2], with a sample of 1210 individuals in the initial phase of Covid-19, revealed that the student status when compared to employee status, was associated with higher levels of stress and anxiety.

The fact that the academic life of higher education, as we knew it, was forced to change suddenly and unannounced can explain this psychological impact for students. Higher Education Institutions in Portugal and Spain reinvented themselves. Otherwise, they would have brought their mission to a halt: Teaching/Learning.

The academic community was confronted by the imperative need to change its paradigm: to move from classroom-based teaching and learning processes to online, distance learning through the use of ICT. The different stakeholders had to become familiar with this new way of teaching and learning in record time.

However, neither teachers nor most students were prepared for this sudden transition in their personal, family, academic and professional lives. We have to ask ourselves: at what cost? What are the repercussions of compulsory confinement and this transition to distance learning in the stress, psychological well-being, and hope for the future of our students? What coping strategies have students adopted to enable their academic success and avoid morbidity in terms of mental health?

There is a potential for growth and development in crises. Admittedly students may experience this. We believe that, for some of them, this will be a time for development, self-knowledge, self-discovery, and learning. It will change their worldview, and their appreciation of communication, the relationship with others, and their surroundings. It will prompt the expression of humility, solidarity, and respect for the other. It will lead to the breakdown of the culture of immediacy, stimulate reflection, and prioritization of values. Finally, it will result in the integral and edifying development of those students as human beings.

That being so, a consortium of seven Portuguese and Spanish higher education institutions, public and private, decided to create a joint research project entitled @studentsONquarantine - Stress, Coping, Psychological well-being, and Hope in Nursing Students during Quarantine by Covid-19. This study is already under development, with its data collection finishing at the end of the state of emergency in Portugal and Spain.

This study aims to understand the reality experienced by nursing students in confinement, to ultimately outline future preventive intervention strategies to promote mental health of our students.

Although the compulsory quarantine is to end soon, distance learning will continue for the next few months, as well as the recommendation of social isolation. All things considered and based on the exploratory study that we are developing, we intend to design and validate an online relaxation program for students. Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of relaxation in relieving stress and promoting mental well-being in students [3-6]. Despite that, there is little evidence of the effectiveness of a distance relaxation program. Taking into account all the changes that we are experiencing in this pandemic phase by Covid-19, we intend to offer the scientific community and civil society an innovative intervention that can prevent/minimize stress and psychological impact on students.

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