



Cognitive stimulation and socialization of institutionalized older adults during the Covid-19 pandemic

Estímulo cognitivo e socialização de idosos institucionalizados na pandemia por Covid-19

Estímulo Cognitivo y Socialización de Ancianos Institucionalizados en la Pandemia por Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To report the experience of nursing students and professors in the development of recreational and pedagogical activities in a Long-Term Care (LTC) Institution for older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Data synthesis:** This is an experience report based on the experience of students and professors of an extension project of the Nursing program in a Long-Term Care Institution for older adults in the countryside of Minas Gerais in the months of June and July 2020. The project team prepared a bingo plan, with all the older adults being awarded with coloring books and crayons. The actions unfolded in four stages: planning of activities; preparation of the material; delivery of printed material; and operationalization of the action. With the delivery of the material to the institution on July 23, the action took place on August 20, 2020. **Conclusion:** The planning and construction of materials, such as the bingo game and the coloring book, allowed the project to extend this follow-up to work even during the pandemic period by proposing two activities that aroused the interest and participation of all those involved.

Descriptors: Homes for the Aged; Health of the Elderly; Coronavirus Infections; Cognition; Games, Recreational; Nursing.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Relatar a experiência de discentes e docentes de enfermagem no desenvolvimento de atividades lúdico-pedagógicas em uma Instituição de Longa Permanência para Idosos (ILPI) durante a pandemia por COVID-19. **Síntese dos dados:** Trata-se de um relato de experiência, a partir da vivência de acadêmicas e docentes de um projeto de extensão do curso de Enfermagem em uma Instituição de Longa Permanência para Idosos, no interior de Minas Gerais, nos meses de junho e julho de 2020. A equipe do projeto elaborou o planejamento de um bingo, sendo todos os idosos premiados com livros de colorir e giz de



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cera. As ações se desdobraram em quatro etapas: planejamento das atividades; elaboração do material; entrega do material impresso; e operacionalização da ação. Com a entrega do material na instituição no dia 23 de julho, realizou-se a dinâmica no dia 20 de agosto de 2020. **Conclusão:** O planejamento e a elaboração de materiais, como o jogo do bingo e o livro de colorir, permitiram que o projeto de extensão desse seguimento ao trabalho mesmo no período da pandemia, propondo duas atividades que despertaram o interesse e a participação de todos os envolvidos.

Descritores: Instituição de Longa Permanência para Idosos; Saúde do Idoso; Infecções por Coronavírus; Cognição; Jogos Recreativos; Enfermagem.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Informar la experiencia de dicentes y docentes de enfermería en el desarrollo de actividades lúdico-pedagógicas en una Institución para Ancianos de Larga Estancia (IALE) en la pandemia por Covid-19. **Síntesis de datos:** Se trata de un informe de experiencia, a partir de la vivencia de académicas y docentes de un proyecto de extensión del curso de Enfermería en una Institución para Ancianos de Larga Estancia, en el interior de Minas Gerais, en los meses de junio y julio de 2020. El equipo del proyecto elaboró la planificación de un bingo, premiando todos los ancianos con libros de colorear y crayón. Las acciones se desplegaron en cuatro etapas: planificación de las actividades; elaboración del material; entrega del material impreso; y operacionalización de la acción. Con la entrega del material en la institución en el día 23 de julio, se realizó la dinámica en el día 20 de agosto de 2020. **Conclusión:** La planificación y la elaboración de materiales, como el juego de bingo y el libro de colorear, permitieron que el proyecto de extensión diera continuidad al trabajo aunque en período de la pandemia, proponiendo dos actividades que despertaron el interés y la participación de todas las partes.

Descriptores: Hogares para Ancianos; Salud del Anciano; Infecciones por Coronavirus; Cognición; Juegos Recreacionales; Enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

Population aging is a global reality. With the demographic transition underway, two billion older adults are expected by 2050⁽¹⁾. In Brazil, studies have shown that the population over 60 years of age will account for 23.4% of the population by 2040⁽²⁾. Given this scenario, even with health policies recommending the permanence of the older adults in the family there is a greater propensity for institutionalization. It is believed that this option provides the older adults and their families with better quality of life⁽³⁾. The reasons that involve choosing Long-term Care (LTC) institutions for older adults include family issues, violence, self-will or family abandonment⁽⁴⁾.

LTC (Long-term Care) institutions for older adults are defined as private or public residential communities for people aged 60 years and over who can either be active and independent of family support and income or in need of long-term care⁽⁵⁾. However, despite being a space for collective interaction, reports of isolation and challenges related to social integration and communication are common⁽⁶⁾.

The LTC environment often has a generalized routine with few stimulating activities, which, added to social isolation, can contribute to the acceleration of senile cognitive decline^(7,8). In this context, strategies need to be redefined in order to minimize the decline in physical and mental functionality and provide spaces for interaction that enhance the socialization of older adults⁽⁷⁾.

From this perspective, it is known that in addition to exercising memory, concentration and attention, cognitive stimulation activities contribute to providing moments of leisure and strengthening friendship ties and bond between the residents themselves and between them and the professionals. Activities with cards, puzzle games, handcraft activities, crosswords, memory games, bingo, among others stand out⁽⁷⁾. Involved in this context, older adults perceive themselves as active individuals with preserved knowledge and mental abilities. In addition, there is evidence that the interpersonal relationship is strengthened, thus contributing to active aging and, consequently, better quality of life^(7,9).

Cognitive stimulation in LTC institutions becomes even more relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which required social distancing as the main form of prevention⁽¹⁰⁾. Discovered in December 2019, the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), responsible for the infectious disease named COVID-19, is more likely to seriously affect older adults or people with certain comorbidities that fall into the risk group, such as people with hypertension and diabetes^(11,12).

It should be noted that LTC residents are at high risk for infection, as they have all the most serious conditions, that is, the population is made up of older adults who live in clusters affected by chronic comorbidities. Additionally, professional caregivers who circulate in other public environments also maintain contact with the older adults^(13,14).

With a view to protecting the most vulnerable groups, the adoption of isolation and social distancing measures has become common, especially in the routine of those exposed to the most severe form of the disease, including older adults. It is noted that the protocol in institutions is the prohibition of visits and outings for tours, as well as the reduction of the time of coexistence and activities in groups. Thus, contact with family members is restricted to virtual visits, often within a specific time⁽¹⁵⁾.

There is evidence that the population that makes up the risk group for COVID-19 is more likely to suffer psychological impacts during the pandemic^(16,17). It is known that recreational and pedagogical activities are relevant instruments to be used in the care of older adults as they provide opportune moments for leisure and health education⁽¹⁸⁾.

Therefore, the present study aims to report the experience of nursing students and professors in the development of recreational and pedagogical activities in a LTC institution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA SYNTHESIS

This is an experience report⁽¹⁹⁾ originating from actions developed by the extension project named Educational Actions and Health Care for Older Residents in a Long-Term Care Institution carried out by students and professors of the Nursing program of a public university in the countryside of Minas Gerais. The project's goal is to sensitize older adults, through health education, to the importance of healthy aging in the physical and cognitive domains in order to achieve longevity and health. For this, approaches were used to stimulate the cognition and socialization of the institutionalized individuals.

The LTC institution chosen for the study is a non-governmental organization supported by donations and the payment corresponding to up to 70% of the minimum wage. The venue offers all meals for an extra fee. A total of 28 older adults live individually in their houses and have preserved mobility. Sociocultural and health care activities are developed to stimulate active aging and provide residents with an environment conducive to social, cultural and spiritual coexistence. The work is carried out by volunteers and partners.

The actions of the extension project unfolded in four stages: planning of activities; preparation of the material; delivery of printed material; and operationalization of the action.

Planning of activities

Aiming at healthy aging, six professors and two students of the project carried out in June and July 2020 a search in the literature on cognition and socialization in older adults. The results pointed to several recreational activities as therapy for older adults, among which were bingo games and picture coloring or drawing. Aspects related to aging need to be glimpsed in order to plan actions focused on healthy active aging. In this context, to reduce the decline of cognition, cognitive stimulation is found to maintain mental health and prevent functional decline⁽²⁰⁾.

Based on a previous theoretical foundation, the project team prepared the planning of a bingo, with all older adults being awarded with coloring books and crayons. The intention was to stimulate memory and socialization through play in a period of social restriction measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for the older adults who are more vulnerable to the disease. The older population is naturally more prone to social isolation, and, in the recent context of the pandemic, it is important to apply efforts in potential preventive activities to reduce the damage that may result from this scenario⁽²¹⁾. Activities related to play in LTC institutions have the potential to reduce isolation and strengthen bonds⁽²²⁾. The institutionalization and isolation of older adults from society and the family are responsible for triggering the feeling of loneliness, even though the LTC environment may be shared^(23,24).

By prohibiting the entry of any person into the study institution, according to the municipality's protocol to reduce the risk of contamination, the participation of caregivers of older adults and the social worker who already work on the site was considered for the execution of the extension action. The institution, therefore, authorized the development of the activity. The project team was involved in the planning, preparation and production of the material, but the activity took place without the presence of the authors.

Preparation of the material

With the aid of the CANVA application, 60 bingo cards were designed to present combinations of the human body (nose, mouth, ear...), objects (hat, chair...), animals (dog, cat, horse...), fruits (banana, apple...) and different foods (cake, broccoli...), all made up of colorful and easily identifiable images. To facilitate the understanding of the professional responsible for conducting the activity on site, each image on the cards was identified in writing in an individual document.

The choice of images consisted of a strategy to stimulate the memory of the older adults when choosing images that are part of everyday life, so they needed to associate the word with the object. In addition, this ensured the inclusion of all residents, regardless of their level of education.

To reward the older adults, 30 coloring books with 17 images each were assembled. Each book had 10 pages, with A4-size sheets divided into two equal parts, eight of which were for drawing. The book was built on Google Documents using various designs researched with the help of Pinterest and Google Images, with large images to facilitate viewing and handling. At the end, CANVA was used to make the cover and back cover. This material was chosen with the aim of providing, through art therapy, a moment of relaxation and strengthening of motor and cognitive skills.

With regard to art therapy with coloring books, it is noted that this activity stimulates creativity, memory and concentration, in addition to being considerably inclusive when observing the expressive number of older adults who got involved with the art of coloring. Studies point to art therapy as a promising strategy for improving motor skills and creating a therapeutic environment, promoting emotional balance through the achievement of deep feelings, providing an opportunity to change the person's view of themselves and the world^(25,26). Playful activities with drawing are capable of developing cognition and promoting leisure⁽²⁵⁾.

The end of this stage took place with the printing of all the material (cards, images on the cards and coloring books) and lamination of the cards in a print shop.

Delivery of printed material and operationalization of the action

The delivery of the material to the institution took place on July 23 and the bingo game took place on August 20, 2020. By telephone, the project coordinator instructed the social worker on how to perform the action. It was emphasized that the aim of a bingo was to stimulate the memory of the older adults as it develops attention and motor coordination at the moment when the player must listen and quickly mark the card. The images called out by the game mediator will allow the older adults to remember objects, animals and human body parts. However, as a result of the pandemic, the distance of one meter between the chairs was recommended during the action and the researchers advised it should preferably take place in an airy and spacious place and participants should wear a mask.

In addition to the telephone guidance, a printed script of the steps to be followed by the professional responsible for conducting the extension action was sent. It was prepared in a spreadsheet on Google Documents: Before starting the game, the cards must be distributed among the participating older adults, being chosen only one per person. Corn grains were recommended for marking the cards. At the beginning of the game, the images must be drawn, one by one, at random, and the player must check if it is on their card. If it is, they should mark it with a corn grain. Upon completing all the images on the card, the player must shout out "Bingo!", being the winner of that game. As the intention is to stimulate cognition and reward all older adults with coloring books, the game will continue until the last older adult shouts "Bingo!".

The students and professors involved in the construction of the bingo and the books noticed the residents and professionals were open to the proposal and obtained positive feedback on the activities. The exchange of experiences was consolidated in a way that allowed the visualization of the older adults' preferences and difficulties, which will contribute to future planning. In addition, the material built and used was low cost and easy to assemble, allowing the continuity of the extension action. Even not actively participating in the operation of the bingo, the planning, construction and delivery of materials allowed the older adults to interact and be stimulated in a period of little social contact and limited activities. However, with the pandemic, there was an interruption of extension actions, bringing harm to the older adults who stopped participating in recreational activities.

For the older adults, keeping their brain active and socializing with other individuals contribute to the maintenance of health and well-being. Games can increase self-confidence and improve self-esteem, favoring active aging⁽²⁷⁾. Cognitive stimulation has positive effects on memory and performance improvement, which can be noticed even in older adults with a certain level of cognitive impairment⁽⁹⁾.

It is believed that recreational activities need to be implemented continuously in LTC institutions, as, in addition to promoting mental health benefits, they allow the development of cognitive and motor skills. The health professional can mediate these moments and assess progress at each meeting, understanding the potential and limitations that involve each person. For that, it is necessary to break with the biomedical paradigm and envision the various aspects that involve aging⁽⁷⁾.

In the pandemic scenario, there was a need to develop socialization measures among residents to minimize the impacts of this moment that amplifies vulnerabilities and weakens physical and emotional well-being^(21,28). Thus,

the performance of activities among older adults proves to be an effective strategy to avoid psychological problems and promote mental health⁽¹⁴⁾. The project has the potential to raise awareness and empowerment among older adults regarding their self-care and foster reflections in students on nursing praxis from the association of theory based on scientific evidence and clinical practice. Therefore, it is important that health professionals are aware of the specificities of advanced age and older adults' preferences in order to create targeted interventions.

On the other hand, one limitation of the study was the non-involvement of the members of the extension project in the operationalization of the bingo game and delivery of the coloring books. Faced with the growing population aging, health promotion actions have become emerging since healthy aging allows better quality of life for older adults, enabling them to continue to participate actively in society.

CONCLUSION

The extension action was guided by the promotion of healthy aging through play, enabling mental exercise and socialization among residents. The Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult to carry out recreational activities of cognitive stimulation and socialization with the older adults as social distancing was necessary to protect this most vulnerable population.

The planning and construction of materials, such as the bingo game and the coloring book, allowed the members of the extension project to continue their work, even away from the older adults, by proposing two activities that arouse the interest and participation of all.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Michelle Souza Nascimento, Ana Carolina Vidigal Vieira Ferreira, Andyara do Carmo Pinto Coelho Paiva contributed to the conception and design of the study; the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data; and the writing and/or revision of the manuscript. **Thaís Vasconcelos Amorim, Geovana Brandão Santana Almeida, Adélia Dayane Guimarães Fonseca** contributed to the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data; and the writing and/or revision of the manuscript. **Fabiola Lisboa da Silveira Fortes, Anna Maria de Oliveira Salimena** contributed to the writing and/or revision of the manuscript.

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