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Online collective care spaces: health promotion in times of isolation due to COVID-19

Espaços on-line de cuidados coletivos: promoção da saúde em tempos de isolamento pela COVID-19

Espacios en línea de cuidados colectivos: promoción de la salud en tiempos de aislamiento por COVID-19

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#### **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** To report the experience of online care actions carried out by the Health Promotion and Prevention Working Group of the University of Brasília (*Universidade de Brasília – UnB*) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Data Synthesis:** This is an experience report on mental health promotion and disease prevention actions developed for the academic community of UnB from March to July 2020. The methodology of systematization of experience was adopted using records of observations of online care actions in field journals: community therapy, relaxation technique, literary chat and solidarity letters. Thus, based on empathy, solidarity, care and interactivity, the actions developed involved several social actors with different experiences aiming at cooperation in search for possible solutions to promote the health of the academic community in times of pandemic. **Conclusion:** The discovery of virtual spaces as therapeutic potentialities proved to be a possible way to strengthen care networks, connections and affective bonds among the academic community at a time of social restriction due to COVID-19, despite the numerous limitations imposed by the use of the technology.

**Descriptors:** Pandemics; Covid-19; Psychosocial support systems; Community networks.

### **RESUMO**

Objetivo: Relatar a experiência das ações de cuidado on-line realizadas pelo Grupo de Trabalho Promoção e Prevenção à Saúde da Universidade de Brasília (UnB) no contexto da pandemia da COVID-19. Síntese dos Dados: Trata-se de um relato de experiência das ações de promoção e prevenção da saúde mental para a comunidade acadêmica da UnB, no período de março a julho de 2020. Adotou-se a metodologia da sistematização de experiência utilizando registros das observações em diários de campo das ações de cuidado on-line: terapia comunitária, técnica de relaxamento, bate-papo literário e cartas solidárias. Assim, com base na empatia, solidariedade, cuidado e interatividade, as ações desenvolvidas envolveram vários atores sociais com experiências diversas, visando à cooperação em busca de soluções possíveis para promoção da saúde da comunidade acadêmica, em tempos de pandemia. Conclusão: A descoberta de espaços virtuais como potencialidades terapêuticas revelou ser um caminho possível para o fortalecimento das redes de cuidado, conexões e laços afetivos entre a comunidade acadêmica num momento de restrição social devido à COVID-19, apesar das inúmeras limitações impostas pelo uso da tecnologia.

Descritores: Pandemias; COVID-19; Sistemas de Apoio Psicossocial; Redes Comunitárias.

## RESUMEN

Objetivo: Informar la experiencia de las acciones de cuidado en línea realizadas por el Grupo de Trabajo, Promoción y prevención a la Salud de la Universidad de Brasilia (UnB) en el contexto de la pandemia de COVID-19. Síntesis de los Datos: Se trata de un



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informe de experiencia de las acciones de promoción de la salud mental para la comunidad académica de la UnB, en el período de marzo a julio de 2020. Se adoptó la metodología de sistematización de experiencia utilizando registros de las observaciones en diarios de campo de las acciones de cuidado en línea: terapia comunitaria, técnica de relajamiento, charla literaria y cartas solidarias. Así, con base en la empatía, solidaridad, cuidado e interactividad, las acciones desarrolladas envolvieron varios actores sociales con diversas experiencias, buscando la cooperación para encontrar posibles soluciones para promoción de la salud de la comunidad académica, en tiempos de pandemia. **Conclusión:** El descubrimiento de espacios virtuales como potencialidades terapéuticas reveló ser un camino posible para el fortalecimiento de las redes de cuidado, conexiones y lazos afectivos entre la comunidad académica en un momento de restricción social debido a COVID-19, a pesar de las innúmeras limitaciones impuestas por el uso de la tecnología.

Descriptores: Pandemias; COVID-19; Sistemas de Apoyo Psicosocial; Redes Comunitarias.

#### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a severe acute syndrome characterized by rapid contagion and which causes respiratory infections, being more severe in older adults and people with comorbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiorespiratory diseases, among others<sup>(1)</sup>. In Brazil, faced with imminent evidence of an epidemic, the Ministry of Health (MoH) instituted in January 2020 the Public Health Emergency Operations Center (COE-COVID-19) and decreed social isolation to stop the spread of the virus in the country<sup>(2,3)</sup>.

The government of the Federal District (*Distrito Federal – DF*) and the University of Brasília (*Universidade de Brasília – UnB*) did the same, which culminated in the suspension of the academic calendar and later resumption in remote mode<sup>(4)</sup>. The coronavirus (Sars-CoV-2, COVID-19) pandemic has affected the lives of students and university staff and resulted in significant disruptions to academic activities. At the same time, the university created its own strategy to face the pandemic and social isolation: the Contingency Plan for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, an institutional proposal that aims to develop actions to assess the risks and impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of the academic community and systematize collective care actions in this scenario of social isolation<sup>(5)</sup>.

Health promotion, herein understood as strategies and ways of producing health, is based on a broad concept of the health-disease process and its social, economic, political, cultural and environmental determinants at the individual and collective levels that articulates technical and popular knowledge and institutional and community resources to promote equity, quality of life and reduce vulnerabilities and health risks<sup>(6,7)</sup>.

In that regard, UnB, as a Health Promoting University (HPU), sought to create, during social isolation, online alternatives for environments that could promote quality of life, well-being, health and risk reduction. The experiences described in this article were based on health promotion actions carried out by UnB through the creation of care spaces that used cultural and literary resources and complementary integrative health practices (*Práticas Integrativas Complementares em Saúde – PICS*). It is understood that literature can be an important resource in the therapeutic field because literary expressions originate from the sensitivity, perception and experience of individuals<sup>(6)</sup> and can create a common language in the academic context. Cultural manifestations can be understood as capable of contributing to the production of health and subjectivity, thus being able to reorient the ways of living, falling ill and taking care/being cared for through procedural experimentation with techniques in the field of arts and sensitive records<sup>(6)</sup>.

PICS contribute effectively in the fields of disease prevention and health promotion, maintenance and recovery. It is based on a model of humanized care centered on the integrality of the individual. It is supported by the HPU framework in the sense of building care and health care, campus well-being, promoting bonds, trust, cooperation and participation<sup>(10)</sup>.

Integrative community therapy (ICT) is a space in which one seeks to create bonds in a judgment-free environment, sharing experience based on an embracing listening of the lived stories reported by the participants<sup>(11)</sup>. Its focus is on user embracement and on the individual and collective demands of everyday life generated by everyday situations, and it is used as a care technology to equip and prepare people to take control of the difficulties faced<sup>(12)</sup>. The relaxation technique (RT) is a technique that seeks to undo physical, mental and emotional tensions, assists in the management of stress through reeducation, helps in changing attitudes and mental reprogramming, and may even result in physiological changes, such as decreased oxygen intake, elimination of carbon dioxide and changes in blood pressure<sup>(13)</sup>. The construction of these spaces favors literary expressions, user embracement, care and the sense of belonging, thereby enabling critical and humanized discussions on health, the sharing of lived experiences, and sociability<sup>(14)</sup>.

Thus, this article aimed to report the experience of online care actions carried out by the UnB Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Working Group in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **DATA SYNTHESIS**

This is an experience report on mental health promotion and prevention actions targeted at the academic community of UnB (students, professors and technical and administrative employees) carried out online from March to July 2020 and developed by the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Working Group (WG) of the university. This WG makes up the UnB Contingency Plan for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, which, in partnership with the State Health Department (Secretaria de Estado da Saúde – SES-DF), the Justice and Citizenship Department (Secretaria Justiça e Cidadania – Sejus-DF), the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz – Fiocruz), and the Federal Council of Psychology (Conselho Federal de Psicologia – CFP), built a collective space that bet on articulation as a strategy to enable online care. To this end, a new way of meeting the demands of psychic illness was adopted based on the structuring of models guided by the virtual perspective and the use of new technological tools.

The proposal for health promotion in times of a pandemic in the context of UnB originated from the foundations of HPU. HPU are strongly based on the assumption that health can only be promoted if there is support of individual and collective actions for changes in organizational development with the potential to promote health and well-being in an integrated and far-reaching way taking into account the relationship between environment and behavior, and between employees, students and the community<sup>(10)</sup>. In this scenario, it is important to highlight that UnB joined the Ibero-American Network of Health Promoting Universities (*Rede Ibero-Americana de Universidades Promotoras de Saúde – RIUPS*) in 2016.

The objectives of the actions developed sought to build spaces of care in the context of social isolation. They were marked by the following characteristics: time flexibility (it could happen in the morning, afternoon or evening); virtual flexibility through the use of various tools such as Zoom®, Jitsi Meet®, Hangouts®, WhatsApp® and Skype®; variability of participants in terms of gender, type of link with the university (students, professors and technical and administrative staff), socioeconomic status; and non-compulsory participation (no attendance control).

The methodological path for interpreting the experiences was divided into five stages: 1) the starting point, that is, the action to be analyzed; 2) initial questions about the actions; 3) retelling of the story and the lived process; 4) background reflection to analyze and interpret the action; and 5) point of arrival to formulate conclusions and lessons learned<sup>(15)</sup>.

Knowing that the virtual space can operate as a catalyst for health promotion and self-care practices<sup>(11)</sup>, the challenge posed to UnB was, in a short space of time, to propose creative and meaningful actions for the academic community using a new language – the virtual one – which is not always familiar to everyone.

Such virtual spaces can be understood as powerful instruments of interaction and socialization, operating in an environment of freedom of expression that is cooperative and egalitarian and provides permanent education with diversity, fostering exchanges and mutual learning. When interacting, debating and exchanging information, individuals feel part of a group despite the physical distance<sup>(16)</sup>. In that regard, the cyberspace can be a place for health promotion, sharing of experiences and assimilation of self-care practices, insofar as its members not only absorb information and knowledge, but actively participate in its elaboration by strengthening ties of collaboration and solidarity in virtual conversation circles<sup>(17)</sup>.

In this study, we chose to use two PICS as techniques and resources to promote health, well-being and quality of life: integrative community therapy (ICT) and meditation linked to a relaxation technique (RT), both in online format. As for cultural and literary resources, the online literary chat (OLC) and solidarity letters (SL) were created. The first was premised on strengthening the relationship between reading and health, the habit of reading among students, and promoting contact and approximation of the university's academic community due to social isolation. The SL consisted of an expression of support and empathy from the university's academic community for the hard journey of professionals who are on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19.

For the systematization of the experiences, the analysis of observations of the four online actions proposed by the WG recorded in field journals was carried out: i) ICT, conducted by professionals with training in the area; ii) OLC; iii) RT and iv) SL. Thus, records were obtained from those responsible for conducting the activities as well as the scholarship holders who supported them.

The present study is the result of a partnership between the University of Brasília (*Universidade de Brasília – UnB*) and the State University of Santa Cruz (*Universidade Estadual de Santa Cruz – UESC*) and was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (*Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa com Seres Humanos – CEP/UESC/UnB*), with Approval No. 4.063.178.

## Integrative community therapy (ICT)

ICT actions are built around five major theoretical axes: i) systemic thinking; ii) communication theory; iii) cultural anthropology; iv) Paulo Freire's pedagogy; and v) resilience<sup>(18)</sup>. Based on these theoretical constructs, the development of ICT occurred in five stages: 1 - user embracement; 2 - choice of theme; 3 - contextualization; 4 - problematization and 5 - closure.

In this context, the first challenge of this experience was the choice of a virtual platform that would allow participants access and enable the dynamics of ICT in the online format. In addition, it should take place without interruption, respecting the full time of a meeting, its execution stages, number of participants and all the necessary care for the proper use of cameras, microphones, chats and online communication rules so that ICT would be developed properly. In this context, the Zoom® platform was chosen.

ICT virtual meetings were attended by undergraduate and graduate students from the university from different campi and courses, including exchange students and professors. The number of participants ranged from 10 to 20 distributed between sessions that took place on Monday evenings, Tuesday afternoons, Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings (meeting aimed at students from the indigenous community), which were conducted by a community therapist trained by the training centers of the Brazilian Association of Integrative Community Therapy (Associação Brasileira de Terapia Comunitária Integrativa – Abratecom). Applications for ICT were advertised on wide-ranging social media with the provision of a link for those interested to fill out a form via email. From March to July 2020, there were 134 people enrolled in the ICT groups, 128 of which were undergraduate and graduate students from the university; one nursing technician; one student at the Federal University of Bahia; one student at UnB Languages (university's language school); one college entrance exam taker; one health professional from the state of Pernambuco; and one professor at the Federal Institute of Brasília.

The meetings followed the five stages proposed by ICT, with each session addressing themes related to the problems, concerns and sufferings of daily life reported by the participants. The themes that appeared most in ICT were: fear and the feeling of anguish and vulnerability due to the pandemic; loneliness, and not being productive (academic activities, projects, daily tasks).

Due to social isolation, ICT played an essential role in involving the university community by creating a supportive and interactive environment. Interactive from the perspective of connections between the various social actors who were motivated to build a dialogic and solidary space for being affective and collaborative. In addition, ICT is important for the person's well-being with themselves and for a better integration and relationship with others through a process of resilience and empowerment<sup>(19)</sup>.

ICT has been considered an Integrative and Complementary Health Practice since March 2017, established by Ordinance No. 849, of March 27, 2017, which provides for the creation and strengthening of solidary social networks<sup>(20)</sup>. It should be noted that between April and May 2020 100 online ICT meetings were held in 14 countries, including Brazil, Mexico, United States, Portugal, France, Switzerland and Italy, reaching approximately 3,500 people<sup>(21)</sup>. Therefore, the possibility of adapting the format and structure of ICT to the online environment favored embracement, care and emotional health promotion of the university community during the period of social isolation.

# Online literary chat (OLC)

The OLC is an interdisciplinary health promotion proposal that counts on eight university professors from different backgrounds, including Anthropologists, Social Scientists, Linguists, Psychologists and Occupational Therapists, thus allowing a collective choice of literary works and the integration and interaction of knowledge in the reflections developed in each meeting. WhatsApp® was chosen as it is an instant messaging application (text messages and voice notes) that can be used on cell phones and because it is a mobile technology that allows users to send messages even without an internet connection, thus favoring accessibility.

The OLC activities took place on Tuesdays and Thursdays and were led by a pair of moderators (professors). The format that the team considered to be the most suitable for the development of actions in this space was through posts on Tuesdays in the WhatsApp group of texts such as poems, poetry, literary works, among others, and the interaction with group participants on Thursdays lasting approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. Advertising for people who signed up for OLC was carried out on social media and on the university's websites. A link to the group was made available to all those interested.

As it is a widely used tool, WhatsApp® allowed a quick interaction during OLC activities, which was not systematized and allowed free expression by text messages or voice notes any time the participant wanted. The material to be discussed in each meeting was made available in advance so that the participants could read it in advance. On

the day of OLC, the participants were encouraged by the pair of moderators to share their reflections, feelings and sensations. To start the discussion, each participant was asked to list a word to summarize their perception of the theme addressed at that meeting. The sessions were light and pleasant and were able to provide a welcoming and pleasant space which aroused the common interest of sharing experiences and strategies in times of social isolation.

From March to July 2020, the group had 157 participants divided between students from different courses and campi, as well as university professors who worked on the following texts: 1) The popcorn, by Rubens Alves; 2) Ideas for Postponing the End of the World, by Ailton Krenak; 3) Dreams, by an unknown author and 4) We should all be Feminists, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

The OLC proposal was based on the premise that art and literature are health enhancers. Art can be understood as a way for people to relate to their affections, and literature is seen as a vital exercise, a passage through the lived experience which creates possible lives and stimulates thought and hence promotes health<sup>(20)</sup>. Aspects associated with health and suffering can be addressed during care actions and, in this context, art can play a fundamental role given its therapeutic effects<sup>(23)</sup>. In addition, reading literary works can alleviate suffering and sadness resulting from adverse situations that are imposed on us, thus creating healing effects<sup>(14)</sup>.

Specifically about the texts chosen in the OLC experience, it was noticed that reading aroused a critical and creative potential that was vividly expressed in the enthusiastic approach of topics such as: the different humanities; the personal relationship with time; racism; feminism; old age; dreams and desires. The collective and creative space forged during the debates also presented fertile ground for exposing anxieties, doubts, fears, dreams and affections.

### Online relaxation technique (RT)

The objective of the RT focused on reducing stress and was conducted through the following steps: provision of information to participants on the dynamics of its functioning, warm-up, relaxation exercises, self-perception, mentalization of positive experiences and closure.

RT has been considered an important resource for reducing stress and anxiety, and the use of music has shown positive influences on relaxation and on altering levels of consciousness<sup>(22)</sup>. The sudden disruption of routine and social isolation favor experiences such as fear, anxiety, insecurity and stress. Thus, the online RT proposal aimed to be a space for self-care and interaction among the academic community.

In that regard, the RT helped the participants improve self-knowledge and provided them with instruments for the search for greater physical and emotional balance<sup>(13)</sup>. Familiarity with the techniques is thought to help participants access them whenever they feel the need, thus reducing the levels of stress and anxiety.

The RT virtual meetings were attended by undergraduate students and university employees from the different campi and were distributed between Tuesdays and Thursdays in the afternoon. At first, there was dissemination of the RT activity on the university campi, on the institution's official social media and websites. Registration took place via Google Forms®. After that, the participants received the link by email to access the virtual environment, where the RT sessions would take place via either Zoom® or Jitsi Meet®. The meetings were conducted by a facilitator, a professional with training in the area, and lasted approximately one hour. The proposal started with information about the RT, followed by breathing techniques, and exercises related to the body and mind to reduce muscle tensions in a way guided by the facilitator. At the end, there was room for exchanges and sharing of the practice experienced.

The use of RT focused on the reduction of stressful situations in terms of disease prevention and promotion of well-being, seeking to minimize the tension imposed by the moment of adversity, since it is a resource with an effect on reducing anxiety and improving quality of life<sup>(24,25)</sup>.

#### **Solidarity Letters**

The community was encouraged to write solidarity letters to the most diverse actors who worked on the front line of the fight against COVID-19, such as health, sanitary surveillance, nutrition/kitchen, security, janitorial, cemetery, ambulance and urban cleaning professionals. The target audiences were selected by the team and disseminated through social media using cards that sought to sensitize the academic and external communities to participate in the writing of solidarity letters. These letters were sent to the e-mail of the Health Promotion and Prevention WG which, after analysis by the team, were given letterheads. Later, there was a partnership with an important local newspaper, which began to publicize the invitation to prepare the letters and publish some of them, thus expanding the reach of the action.

The next step was to establish contact with selected target audience representatives and jointly agree on the letter delivery strategy. With the delivery of the letters occurring weekly and via e-mail, the representatives of the North

Wing Regional Hospital (Hospital Regional da Asa Norte – HRAN) – a hospital fully available for the hospitalization of patients with COVID-19 – printed and attached the letters to their bulletin boards in each hospital unit. There was also hand-delivery of letters by representatives of the team to professionals who worked at the Brasília cemetery, in ambulances, and in urban cleaning services. These actions had a great repercussion in the local media and were publicized in printed newspapers, radio shows and in different television news.

Letters were received in the most diverse formats: narratives, poems and interactive letters. More than an action of solidarity, it is about recognizing the essentiality of the work of all these actors, as well as the precarious working conditions to which many of them are exposed.

It was understood that written language is a fundamental tool for the communication and expression of feelings, thoughts, memories, desires, and that putting everyday sensations into words can trigger subjective transformations, both for the writer and the reader<sup>(25,14)</sup>. According to the contents of the letters received, it was assumed that, when writing, their authors were able to reflect on the situations and events experienced in the face of the pandemic, highlighting the appreciation of professionals who are on the front line of the fight against COVID-19.

As a collective construction, online care spaces required several efforts involving a permanent exchange of knowledge formed from various knowledges and practices. The reported experiences permeate a varied sphere of social interaction, proving to be a rich source for research, sharing and mutual support, concretizing the construction of a network of care and solidarity. The discovery of virtual spaces as potentialities for health promotion proved to be a possible way to strengthen care networks, connections and affective bonds among the academic community in a period when everyone is experiencing a moment of social restriction due to COVID-19, despite the numerous limitations imposed by the use of technology.

#### CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation and, in many ways, has greatly challenged the health system and its professionals, demanding new approaches and care strategies to deal with both those affected by the disease and situations arising from social isolation, which caused a great psychosocial impact on the academic community of UnB. Guided by the principles of empathy, solidarity, care and interactivity, the actions developed involved several social actors with different experiences and with the common objective of cooperation in search for possible solutions to face the challenges imposed by the pandemic and social isolation with a view to promoting the health of the academic community.

The complexity of promoting actions based on health promotion in order to face the social isolation imposed by COVID-19 required innovations in the search for alternatives and individual and collective solutions to face the challenges presented, which demanded not only a collective effort from the academic community, but a good desire to learn and build together.

The discovery of virtual spaces as therapeutic potentialities proved to be a possible way to strengthen care networks, connections and affective bonds among the academic community at a time of social restriction due to COVID-19, despite the numerous limitations imposed by the use of technology.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

### CONTRIBUTIONS

Daniela Silva Rodrigues, Flávia Mazitelli de Oliveira, Josenaide Engracia dos Santos and Andrea Donatti Gallassi equally contributed to the conception and design of the study; acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data; writing and revision of the manuscript and are responsible for its content and integrity.

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