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Self-Management of Fear due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Changes it has brought to the Every Day Life

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SUMMARY: Introduction: The recent pandemic of the new coronavirus, COVID-19, has had financial and social repercussions apart from its consequences to the physical and mental health of humans.

Aim: The aim of this work was to study the way of the self-management of stress and fear which has been caused by the pandemic crisis, as well as the impact of the pandemic on daily living. More specifically, the factors which influenced the management of the symptoms of fear, either in a positive or in a negative way, were studied, and also the ways individuals and their families use to manage fear.

Method: The method which was used was the case study of an adult female who lives and works in a Greek town, during the third curfew, in March 2021. The tool which was used for data collection was the semi-structured interview, by utilizing a questionnaire consisting of 10 open-ended questions. Before the start of the interview, a signed informed consent form was obtained. The questions were divided into three topic areas, with the first concerning the demonstration of stress before the pandemic broke out, the second concerning the fear during the pandemic, and the third dealing with the ways of managing fear, the availability of persons capable of helping, as well as the kind of help she could have sought to cope with this situation.

Results: The results of this study showed the impact of the curfew restrictions for the management of the pandemic on the daily lives of the people who experience them. Before the start of the pandemic, stress was primarily related to work and to the need of maintaining a routine. Public fear intensified during the pandemic and the lockdown, both in relation to work and in relation to the pandemic itself, and also in relation to its effects on work and social life, and certainly on physical and mental health. Her stress

affected the rest of her family members; however, her social network proved to be a significant support.

Conclusions: *Stress and fear increased during the pandemic and the lockdown which was imposed in Greece in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This stress, which prior to the pandemic was focused mainly on work-related issues, spread to other areas of daily life, a fact that affected all the family members. Discussions and support from the husband, and also from the wider circle of family and friends, helped deal with and manage the situation which was caused by the pandemic, due to the special living conditions which were in force.*

INTRODUCTION

The new virus, SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), which was identified for the first time in December of 2019 in Wuhan China, has already infected more than 139 million people worldwide, with significant losses and long-term consequences in the population.¹ However, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic do not affect only those who were infected by the virus; its effects are evident in the world population regardless of whether one has contracted this disease or not.² The infection from this virus and the measures taken by governments all over the world for the containment of its spread, such as self-quarantine at home, curfews, and the restriction of work or moving in the non-essential areas of economy, and also the shutting down of schools, have serious effects in economy, society, family and in the whole system of health.^{2,3}

With regard to the psychological consequences during the pandemic, studies have shown that increased percentages of anxiety, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), psychological distress, and stress were reported in the general population during the pandemic. This, to a large extent, is due to social isolation and self-quarantine at home.⁴ In addition, another feeling which is observed in a large scale is the feeling of fear and also the feeling of anger;⁵ fear felt not only by those who are or were ill with this disease, but fear felt also by the general population, while anger is a general feeling which is thought to be triggered by the measures which restrict vital personal freedoms. It is definitely worth noting that studies show that during pandemics the number of people whose mental health is affected tends to be higher than the number of people who are ill from the virus which caused the pandemic.⁶ Stress shows a high prevalence in the general population during the pandemic,⁷ and this event has affected family mental health and family relations significantly.

Research to date tends to deal with the general effects of the pandemic in the population,^{8,9,10} while in recent months it is more focused on special issues, like effects dependent on sex,¹¹ body weight,¹² unemployment¹³ and on even more specialized topics. Research regarding fear has focused primarily on the extent of vaccination but has not dealt with the self-management of the fear of vaccination by individuals, families, and communities.^{14,15,16} This indeed was the research gap which the members of the present research team have addressed in this study.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was employed in carrying out this study. More specifically, a case-study design was used, as the research team wanted to record the experiences which a person can have during the pandemic and the ways of self-management she chose. Thus, the basic priority was not the generalization of results, but getting an insight into the perceptions an individual may hold about the situation she experiences, and how this situation shapes her daily life.

The research tool which was used for gathering data was the semi-structured interview with in-depth discussion; it was chosen for the flexibility it offers and because during a discussion other facets of the problem, that we might not have thought of, might be revealed. The interview guide was specifically made for the needs of the present study and was inspired by weighted relative scales of fear measurement.^{17,18,19,20} The questions were separated into three topic areas, the first relating to the participant's more general lifestyle and whether she feels fear in her life and how she self-manages it; the second regarding whether the fear intensified during the pandemic and in which areas of her life, as well as whether this affected her family; and, finally, the third topic area which relates to questions about which ways she uses to overcome the fear she feels now in relation to the pandemic, in cooperation with her family and with her social network.

The sample of the study was a 34-year-old woman, married, with two children aged 6.5 and 8.5 attending primary school, who lives with them and with her husband in Heraklion, Crete. The woman has graduated from the Department of Preschool Education of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and is a student at the Postgraduate Course "Educational Sciences" of the Greek Open University, and for the last 11 years, she has been working as a kindergarten teacher in the wider area of Heraklion. She does not suffer

from any disease and neither do her children or her husband, while she considers their monthly family income as “satisfactory”.

During the interview, after the participant was informed that it would be recorded, a form requiring informed consent and confidentiality was read, the participant signed it, and she was informed that she could depart from the discussion whenever she wished. We tried to create a friendly and cozy atmosphere during the interview, as far as possible. In the course of the interview clarification questions were made, whenever needed.

RESULTS

The results of the study are divided into three topic areas: A. the fear and stress in the life of the participant before the pandemic, B. the consequences of the pandemic on the level of fear, and C. the self-management of the fear caused by the pandemic crisis.

A. Fear and stress before the pandemic

The answer to the questions of the first topic area with regard to the factors that cause stress and fear in the daily life of the participant was:

“I am mainly stressed with issues relating to my work. I work as a kindergarten teacher, so I am concerned about whether all is getting on well during the lesson, whether children are involved in an accident, about the safety of the children in general. Such incidents occur almost on a daily basis at school, so there is not just a single incident to describe, every day there is some relative concern, and I am constantly on alert. Generally speaking, every single day I’ve got a plan in my life, that is, every day I set a target to achieve something. So, a lot of times when this plan is not realized, I feel anxious, stressed, a kind of stress that I don’t know how to describe. I just don’t like not being able to stick to my plan. If something happens and it changes my schedule, it will stress or scare me. Nor can I cope with some demands which will be made on me, and this is one of my phobias. When my daily plan is changed, it stresses or frightens me. I try not to think about it all the time, to be more relaxed, I try to think positively, that everything will work out fine, all this basically.

I could characterize myself as a stressful personality, but I don’t know whether this is valid the way the hectic contemporary daily conditions have been shaped. Most people are in a hurry to manage their basic responsibilities. That is to say, if I compare myself to most people, then I may

not be so stressful, but just a normal personality. I am not going to conceal from you the fact that the fear I have mainly relates to whether I will have the time to complete all my responsibilities at work, or at home, successfully. Obviously, I had not realized anything before the start of the pandemic. I thought that I was afraid of other things, or that I used to be stressed with other issues in the past, but things have completely changed with the pandemic. There are certainly times when I’m thinking about whether I should consult a specialist, but then I forget and postpone it.”

B. Representative excerpts from her replies to the group of questions relating to the pandemic and to how it affected her daily life were:

“Since the Pandemic broke out, a more general fear for the unknown, which I did not have before, was instilled in me. I can say that my feelings were mainly fear and stress. I was more stressed about my health and also about the health of my beloved persons, and I would like to report that the stress about death was instilled more by the mass media. I may have had personal anxieties which most likely had never been activated. I stopped thinking about whether I would be able to complete my responsibilities on time because a lot of time was made available thanks to teleworking, so I found myself at home with plenty of time to devote even to myself, something I never did before. In spite of all this, I cannot say that my feelings were pleasant because new fears were born out of nowhere, like for instance the fear of intubation, the fear of whether this pandemic will ever end, and what consequences it will eventually have on our day to day lives; fear about the safety of our beloved persons, and even financial anxieties because the economy has been hit hard by this crisis. All these feelings made me isolate myself, get angry quickly, and irritable. This caused conflicts within the family context, both with my husband and with the children. I reached a point where I watched television and got even more panicked, and so, even though presumably there was plenty of time which one could use creatively, I reached a point where I developed feelings of depression, of being kept at a distance because of this social distancing, and, eventually, I became more scared and stressed than ever.”

C. Regarding self-management of fear during the pandemic, the participant reported:

“Especially during the first period, in March of last year, I felt more concerned and fearful of the unknown every day, without being able to make sense of the reason. Then I started thinking that if I went out of my house I might contract the disease and that something awful might happen to me or to my family members, so I wanted to stay at home more hours and I certainly avoided going out even for a walk away from crowded places, and I avoided socializing with friends and acquaintances, even with my own parents who live upstairs. Then I had some fears related to my work.

At the beginning, I definitely felt negative! I felt I could not do it, I didn't know it and I started panicking a little, I might say (author's clarification: She refers to teleworking). It was obviously because I had to use a computer to teach kindergarten pupils, something which I don't consider being easy for this age group, regardless of the fact that one way or another the whole process of teaching through a computer is difficult for me, as I do not feel comfortable, nor do I have the required know-how. The unknown also scared me a great deal, that is, I did not know how the children would react to this process, how parents, colleagues, or even myself would react. All this caused nervousness and more stress to me.

More generally, when the pandemic broke out, my stress was significantly higher than before. Whenever there was a lockdown, my stress was generally higher, because you did not know how long you would have to be homebound for. So, for me it was the same, the stress intensified whenever there was a lockdown, and the longer the lockdown, the higher my stress was. What am I more concerned about?

About how we are going to go back to the normal daily routines we had before all this situation, definitely. I am so much afraid, that I think we will never be able to go back to normal, as we were before all this. At least not completely.

I try not to show it, but because there are a lot of things in my family that depend on me for their carrying out, and I think the whole program of my family has been affected. Therefore, yes, I believe that my family is sensing my stress either directly or indirectly. If I judge by the fact that I see more irritation, either in my husband or in my children, and also by their unwillingness to do various things of our daily routine, then, yes, there is not the calm which existed before all this situation, regardless of the fact that everyone reacts differently to being stressed.

I think it would surely help me if we could go back to how we used to be before the pandemic, that is, if we could go out more easily, if we did not have the stress to avoid being infected, if we did not have all these restrictions in our lives about where it is allowed to go and where it isn't, so that we could do things which we can't do now, like going to a cafe with a friend, allowing my children to play with other children, or so that we would be able to go on holidays to new places. (Author's clarification: I'm trying) not to make negative thoughts and to spend more time relaxing, like playing with my children, or going for a walk in the countryside, or to enjoy playing a table game or seeing a film all together, or even taking up a hobby at home, since I cannot be outside for long.

My husband is a person I trust, I can share my apprehensions with him and he has supported me throughout our relationship until now, and he helps me cope with my anxiety and stress. He has a way through conversation, to make me realize that what I feel, about whatever problem, is a lot smaller than the significance I attribute to it, and that, usually, it can be managed. This helps me to calm down, to think in a more relaxed manner, and to be able to face whatever problems arise. It is the calm side of my life; for this reason, I consider he is significant to me. Conversation generally helps me. Even an unknown person whom I could trust would help me cope with this situation, and definitely, a specialist, who would also be impartial, if I trusted him, I believe he could help me with this situation. For the time being, however, talking with my husband or with other persons I trust, like my parents or my friends, helps me to calm down, no matter whether they are experts or not, through conversation.”

DISCUSSION

Data analysis was applied on the three topic areas mentioned previously. The first topic area aimed at examining the previous state of fear in her daily life even before the pandemic, and whether she managed to deal with it. During the interview, it was noticed that the stress which existed in the participant's life was the normal kind of stress people have, especially teachers at their work, as it becomes evident from the bibliography.²¹ There was a tendency for developing stress and fear; however, the situation was completely manageable. In addition, the ways she used to manage her feelings of concern were mainly focused on the communication she established with the individuals of her social

network, a fact pointing to the common ways of coping with stress, as they are recommended by the CDC.²²

In the second topic area, an effort was made to find out how much of this stress increased during the pandemic. As it has been evidenced by studies which have been carried out, the levels of stress, of fear, of depression, and, more generally, of mental disorders increase during pandemics, primarily because of the measures of isolation, of unemployment, and also of the fear for the unknown which is prevalent.^{23,24,25} Thus, in the results of the present study, the participant herself realized that the levels of her stress and also of her fear for the unknown were higher at her work, both with regard to the disease and with regard to the unknown. Additionally, this stress seems to have been affected by the quarantine measures, while it also seems that the rest of the members of her social network have also been affected.

In the third topic area, the participant declared that she considers her husband and her wider family, like her parents, to be a significant support, as they help her mitigate her stress symptoms through conversation, while she also states that the opinion of an expert might also help. This whole management seems to be what was expected as it is evidenced by the ways already recommended by the CDC²² for dealing with stress, while the fact that she might see an expert about the problem of stress if needed, shows that perhaps this issue is not dealt with as a taboo, as is usually the case in countries like Greece.²⁶

The last pandemic, COVID-19, which is still in progress up to this moment, seems to have had a very large impact on people's lives all over the world. As it was expected, apart from the effects on people themselves concerning their health, it has also had enormous repercussions in economies, both those of countries and those of families, and big social effects, as social inequalities, xenophobia and discriminations are spawned. It also has had very large repercussions both in public and in family health. As it has become apparent by this specific case study, fear plays a vital role in the mental health of people who have to face this situation, even of those who have not been affected financially. This fact is not new, as the effects of a pandemic on the mental health of citizens have been known since old times.⁶

What arises from the data is that the role of the mass media is very significant in instilling fear, calm, and even in developing health training for the population. The participant experienced

very negative consequences and through her words, she showed that she tends to deal with situations in a stressful manner. This tendency to stress, however, increased even more during the pandemic, and its effects were focused primarily on symptoms of depression, social isolation, irritability, and conflicts within the family. It is precisely this course of intensification of symptoms which is also highlighted by recent bibliography, while it becomes clear that individuals who have to comply with restrictive measures due to the pandemic crisis are filled with plenty of negative feelings.^{8,9,10}

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions which arise from the present study cannot be generalized in any way; they can only serve as a trigger for larger studies, mainly with triangulation research methodology. However, the research team thinks that the gathering of qualitative data, such as data from case studies, can illustrate the socio-cultural framework in which health issues are experienced. The results of the research demonstrate that individuals who had a stressful background before the pandemic have a higher tendency to develop phobias during the pandemic. The participant in this case study experienced stress due to the hectic rhythm of her daily life; however, after the changes of this daily routine and the restrictions, like for instance the lockdown, she demonstrated an increase and further development of fear. Her fear was more focused on the unknown and also on the care and protection of her loved ones. Moreover, the mass media seem to play a significant role in worsening the feeling of the heightened fear of the participant. It was also reported that the effects of the fear were primarily social isolation, irritability, and conflicts.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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