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The Psychosocial Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Adolescents

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Abstract: *Recent research dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people and adolescents focused mainly on the aspects with a negative impact, and also on the intervention methods to overcome this crisis and the post-crisis impacts on social life. In this research, I thought it would be useful to approach the issue from a different perspective, analyzing the ways in which some adolescents managed the pandemic period, using specialty support and also personal, social, school and family resources. The qualitative research - conducted through the semi-structured interview - and the thematic analysis were really helpful in summarizing information and in identifying/ understanding some protective factors for adolescents during major social crises with a real psychological impact.*

Keywords: *adolescence, anxiety, depression, crisis, COVID-19, specialty aid, qualitative research.*

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Introduction

When talking about pandemics, research shows that fear, uncertainty and the feeling of insecurity occur worldwide, and social realities change significantly. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic generated a number of emotions and feelings among people of all ages which were difficult to manage. The outbreak of the pandemic imposed a change in our lifestyle, in our personal reality, and even more importantly, a change in our perspective on life, which caused a deep inner disequilibrium and an intense adaptation effort.

The increased stress and anxiety levels were the main aspects with a significant negative impact on population. Several studies concluded that people diagnosed with COVID-19 had anxiety symptoms (Mazza et al., 2020; Taquet, 2020), depressive symptoms (O'Sullivan et al., 2021), as well as sleep disorders (Mazza et al., 2020). Oxford University Press reports that while the extent of neuropsychiatric symptoms following a COVID-19 infection cannot be accurately measured, persistent symptoms include sleep disorder, fatigue, cognitive impairment, anxiety and post-traumatic stress (Petrescu, 2022).

In several events and press releases in March 2020, the World Health Organization professionals insisted on the importance of human interaction during the pandemic period. Social distancing was one of the prevention measures when people had to interact remotely, through the use of phone and communication platforms.

Investigations into the correlation between a SARS-COV-2 diagnosis and mental health concluded that the COVID-19 diagnosis was associated with an increased incidence of a first psychiatric diagnosis in the next three months after diagnosis in patients without a psychiatric medical history, with increased risks for anxiety disorders, insomnia and dementia. Thus, the diagnosis of a mental problem in the 14-90 days after testing positive for COVID-19 occurred in 18.1% of the cases under analysis (Taquet, 2020).

It was also found that people who had more severe forms of COVID-19 (with bed-confined status for at least seven days) have an increased risk of experiencing depressive or anxiety symptoms for a period of up to 16 months following diagnosis. The severity of the COVID-19-related symptoms led to the development of some psychological mechanisms, which caused a longer persistence of depression and anxiety once the symptoms subsided. On the other hand, people who experienced less severe symptoms showed a reduced risk of new onset and persistent mental disorders. This may be due both to the acquired immunization that

allowed them to return to their normal activities and a greater freedom of movement, and also to the possibility of seeing their family and friends again without the risk of infecting them (Magnúsdóttir et al., 2022).

The Collaborative Outcomes study on Health and Functioning during Infection Times - COH-FIT, which also included the "Socola" Psychiatry Institute in Iasi, was an investigation project focused on the population affected by COVID-19, with over 185,000 studies conducted in 156 countries. COH-FIT aimed to identify the risk and protection factors, and also the management of long-term prevention and intervention programs in the event of other future pandemics. There were more than 3,200 Romanian respondents (in 2023), aged between 28-50 years and predominantly women, in a proportion of over 80% (COH-FIT, n.d.). The major trend, in terms of psychosocial impact, covered the issue of stress, nervousness and loneliness. More specifically, a third of the respondents reported an increase in stress levels, especially in the case of women - 46% and young adults - 47%. Also, a quarter of respondents reported a worsening of loneliness, with an increase in the case of young people - 36%. Most respondents reported an increased interest in the use of mass media, as a form of coping, with an increase in the number of hours spent in front of screens in the period following the outbreak of the pandemic, especially among women and young adults (COH-FIT, n.d.).

The protective measures, especially the emergency lockdown, had a massive impact on the lifestyle, deeply affecting individuals and causing feelings of loneliness, alcohol and substance abuse, self-harm or even suicidal thoughts (WHO, 2020). It is important to note that negative results regarding mental health occurred not only in those who caught the disease, but also in those who were not infected.

Initially, anxiety was caused by uncertainty and fear of the unknown; later on this was caused by the fact it was impossible to perceive an end to the disturbing situation and a return to normal (Petrescu, 2022). Physical isolation was unquestionably important in reducing the contamination risk, but the negative consequences, especially for mental health, will be felt for a long time (Frontini et al., 2021).

Methodological milestones regarding the research of the psychosocial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on adolescents

Methodology is *the integrated science of methods, where method is the rational approach of the spirit to discover the truth or solve a problem* (Chelcea, 2001) and it deals with two aspects. On the one hand the analysis of the research activity

and on the other hand, drawing up some suggestions to improve the reality under analysis.

The study is of a *qualitative* study and I chose the *phenomenological research method* (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012) to describe the essence of an experienced phenomenon, as the most appropriate way to examine the proposed research goals.

The research design included the *semi-directive and semi-structured interview*, based on an *Interview Guide* that includes the items to be covered in the discussion for each individual topic. The interview used the *funneling technique*, where the way questions are constructed and formulated allows you to move from general topics to specific themes (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Based on how the accounts evolved, the interviewer also asked clarifying questions related to the relevant ideas.

The interview was administered individually, in public but quiet places so as not to be disturbed by other external factors, in locations chosen by the interviewees to be as comfortable as possible. At the beginning of the meeting, the interviewee was reminded of the main topic under discussion, some details about the interviewer and the fact that they could withdraw at any time, with no consequences. They, also, were given assurance on the privacy of provided information, their identity had been hiden, the only revealed information being the respondents' age and gender. The permission was requested in order to record the conversation for a more accurate exposure. All participants gave their informed consent for participating the study and for the adolescents under 18 years of age, parental consent was requested.

The sample in this research included 10 teenagers (N=10) from Iaşi, 9 high school students and a first-year university student, 6 boys and 4 girls, aged 16-20 years. The sample size was set in accordance with the recommendations made by specialists for the chosen type of research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The sampling strategy is part of the *goal-oriented category*, following *typical cases of individuals*, to highlight what's normal in the age category. The sample was defined *a priori*, taking into account the targeted category; it included high school and university students in Iasi, known to the researcher. The main requirement to be selected in the sample was the absence of a pre-existing diagnosis of mental disorders and to consider that they had gone through the pandemic relatively well.

Data was collected from March 17 - May 5, 2022, when individual meetings were scheduled and the questions from the interview guide were administered.

The research results on the impact of depressive phenomenon in adolescents during the Covid-19 period and the identification of protective factors for overcoming the pandemic crisis

The research results were analyzed on two major themes: the adolescents' perspective in relation to the pandemic crisis and the impact of some protective factors in the development of resilience in young people. The first topic is addressed by this study and covers the adolescents' perception on the occurrence of the anxious and depressive phenomenon during the pandemic in the age segment targeted by the research and also the identification of the most effective methods and tools for developing psycho-social skills in the same age category. The second theme will be developed in a subsequent study.

The adolescents were interviewed using the interview guide and the interview was semi-structured on five major topics: adolescent's home and family; education and leisure; the psycho-social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; elements related to anxiety or depression; aspects related to faith. This study focuses on the thematic analysis of the psycho-social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents.

Initially, inspired by other theoretical studies in the psycho-spiritual field, the adolescents were asked to express their feelings about the outbreak of the pandemic, to detail how the pandemic impacted them and their friendships, their friends, their school tasks and whether they interacted with friends/acquaintances with excessive sadness or distorted thoughts during this period (Nistor 2017a,b,c; Sandu & Nistor 2020 a,b,c; Nistor 2023a,b).

Perspective on illness and how it was felt by adolescents

As for the adolescents' perception of the pandemic, and also of the concept of the disease itself, this was very diverse. If in the beginning of the period, all interviewees made fun of the situation, enjoying the freedom offered by the school closure and the absence of daily pressure, later on, while listening to the news and seeing the statistics of daily infections and deaths, they began to feel the fear of Covid-19, both for them and for their loved ones.

`For me it was a joke in the beginning...` (girl, 16 years)

`Back then I didn't realize how bad the situation was. I remember I wasn't even wearing a mask` (boy, 17 years)

`I didn't feel that lockdown was that bad, but I was really scared of the COVID ... a lot of people wearing oxygen masks, and that scared me a little." (boy, 16 years)

`...I think everyone was really scared in the beginning, we didn't know what it was`. (girl, 16 years)

Information on the pandemic development was uniform. Everyone was interested and were watching with interest and were debating with family and friends about the rise in the number of infections and deaths published daily. In a first phase, the huge volume of information in the media, and all this information was not verified or correct, caused multiple anxieties; gradually young people got used to the idea, stating that they no longer felt fear of the virus.

`I gave up at some point. I said to myself I was having dark thoughts for nothing, so I'd better not listen and that's it. This thing was stressing me out...` (girl, 16 years)

In general, adolescents reported that they didn't have to deal with people overwhelmed by anxiety or depression or who had suicidal thoughts because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are two accounts of close friends who had depressive symptoms. One of the cases was reported as a matter of amusement for the group at first, as the person was considered to be looking for extra attention. But when the case got worse, the group took action and offered support and help. In the second case, the support provided by the interviewee was a factor in the psycho-emotional recovery of the friend experiencing depressive symptoms.

`I have a friend who ... was in a deep depression, and she had some strange thoughts... At first I took everything casually, I was thinking she just wanted attention, but I realized that it wasn't the case, she was really having problems`. (girl, 16 years)

`My friend was feeling very lonely, he'd fight a lot with his parents and was always demoralized ... we'd talk quite often, I also went out with him and he gradually recovered` (boy, 17 years)

The school role in supporting adolescents and adapting to change in the pandemic context

To have a clearer image on adolescents' personality and the reality of social environment and events in their life, questions were asked about their relationship with school, teachers and colleagues, future plans and how they spend their leisure time.

Regarding their relationship with school, adolescents are typically optimistic about the concept itself, and the most pleasant aspect related to school, reported by most of the interviewees, was the joy of returning physically to the school environment.

`Right now I'm very happy that I have the chance to physically go to high school, because I had a lot of online classes during my high school and this was definitely an experience that affected my school performance` (girl, 18 years)

Regarding the positive aspects of school, all, with no exception, reported the class group and the peers in school/class as the most pleasant thing about school, while the `opportunity to develop and learn new things daily` was reported only in a few instances.

`When I think of school I think of friends, I like school because we have a cool group and I get along well with everyone` (boy, 16 years)

`For me the most pleasant things about school are my colleagues and my friends, the breaks...` (boy, 16 years)

`I've always put a lot of emphasis on high school education and right now I feel that it's one of the few methods by which I can develop myself in this academic area` (girl, 18 years old)

Although the discussion focused on the perspective of school while online, they reported a lot of negative aspects such as: teachers' attitude, the lack of interest in establishing a genuine connection with students, the uninvolved manner of teaching and the biased assessment. Their experiences were described in detail, with great enthusiasm, and this is why we consider them as potential stressors in the school environment.

`Teachers just want to teach their classes and want us to know everything and that's it. They don't want us to like that subject, they just want to teach their subject, and if we don't know it, to give us low grades. That's it`! (boy, 16 years)

`During the pandemic I took private lessons with a tutor and the teacher can't stand me for taking private lessons with someone else`. (boy, 16 years)

`I go to school because I have to, I don't feel any pleasure ... it's not helpful for us to study a subject out of fear or to learn the subject by heart like parrots` (girl, 16 years)

During the discussions, young people felt appropriate to report a number of positive behaviors in teachers, disclosing the fact that they are given a sense of well-being, favorable to learning, which they typically associate with a positive school experience.

`With our teacher ... we can talk about everything, about love, about hobbies ... she tells us things, makes the class much more interesting` (girl, 16 years old)

`The classes ... are interactive. We debate. I really enjoy getting the opinions of colleagues on a topic under discussion. Then the teacher explains...`(boy, 16 years)

`I also like the validation from the teachers...when I go to the blackboard and I get to solve a problem, the teacher congratulates and smiles back to me and that makes me feel good` (boy, 16 years old)

`I like the classes taught by some particular teachers ... the classroom atmosphere, sometimes jokes are made during the classes ... it's nice not to be stressed because of the teachers` (girl, 16 years)

As regards the online school, the general view was in alignment with the belief that the educational process was significantly impacted. In relation to the online classes, the interviewees reported that the information was minimal, the teaching method was not suitable, the teachers were not prepared to teach such classes, and most of the students did not pay attention to them, being focused on other camera-off activities, such as games, discussions with friends, homework in other subjects, etc.

`I didn't take online school seriously at all, I would sleep with the video camera off` (girl, 16 years)

`Some teachers weren't teaching their classes, others were trying, but no one was paying attention to them...` (boy, 17 years)

`I would skip most of the classes or I took advantage of that time to do my homework for the Romanian and Math private lessons` (boy, 16 years)

`...online school really affected us... I was losing track, like I was no longer able to understand, I was losing myself, and I wasn't able to concentrate. A lot of kids lose their focus when online` (girl, 16 years)

`The information was minimal, the teachers didn't bother to explain, the homework was either too much in some subjects to compensate, or too little because the subject couldn't be taught` (girl, 18 years)

As regards their future plans to continue studies after high school, the answers were very diverse, such as: Police Academy, Faculty of Computer Sciences, Architecture, Law, Medicine School, Physics, Management, Social Work or even Fine Arts.

Adolescents' attitude on leisure in the pandemic

During the pandemic there wasn't a variety of pastime activities. Typically, for those interested in studying reading played an important role, but for most, leisure time is filled by technology, either computer games (in the case of boys), or social networks and interactive platforms on the phone (especially in the case girls, but also some boys). It is important to note that they became aware of their phone addiction and are unable to stay out of this since they interact with their friends, mainly, via their phones. A teenage girl admits she would prefer a life with no phones.

`I spend a lot of time on the phone, yes and I regret this, it's just that it's become an addiction, I admit it... I spend a lot of time on Instagram talking with the folks out there... but I liked the way the world was before, like it was more real. Now everything is shallow, I don't like it!"(girl, 16 years old)

`I feel like it's taking up too much of my time and I could be doing something better with that time` (boy, 16 years)

In addition to these, there were also reported activities such as: going out with friends, basketball, gym, dancing, drawing, cycling, but only briefly, in addition to the ones previously reported. Only one person reported spending time in nature as a favorite pastime activity, the idyllic image of the landscape near the parental home returning several times during the discussion.

Volunteering as a form of social therapy in the pandemic

If the girls reported involvement in various volunteer organizations, talking passionately about the work done in there, stating that volunteering brings them happiness and makes them feel that they're really contributing to society (Nistor, 2022 a, b), the boys reported involvement in various contests or olympiads:

`I had the role of manager in a volunteer organization... so the activity that takes up most of my time is volunteering in which I'm involved with all my heart` (girl, 18 years)

`I'm involved in a volunteering event with an association` (girl, 20 years)

`Now, for example, I'm preparing for the National Biology Olympiad` (boy, 17 years)

`...I joined a screenplay contest where teams from all over the country sign up` (boy, 17 years)

Elements related to anxiety and depression in adolescents

A particular attention was paid to the interview structure by which we tried to identify the presence of feelings, emotions or thoughts in the respondents that signal the presence of anxiety or depressive disorders. I also wanted to identify the resources they used, the people and the specialty help they sought.

In order to outline how they perceive the `self, how much they understand their own person and also the surrounding world, we used the *mirror principle*, asking the teenagers to state their view about what they see when they look in the mirror. Also, they were asked to describe their life in one word and also their life in the pandemic.

The respondents' answers confirmed the studies in the area (Gaspar & Nistor 2020, 2022), and their common, general element is the fear of death, but not so much for oneself as for those close to you (parents, grandparents, relatives, friends). Along with this main fear, they also reported the fear of unpredictable evolution of Covid-19, hospitalization in

pandemic conditions, and also the fact that they could be the source of infection for their loved ones, especially when the activity was resumed.

`I was immersed in all this news, I was afraid of death, of illness, especially for the others, for grandparents, for my family` (girl, 16 years)

`I was worried about them (grandparents), not to die, not to be taken to the hospital as I knew they had other diseases, I was thinking it would not be easy for them` (boy, 17 years old)

`It was more like the fear that my family might get sick and that somehow I have to live with that thought in my mind, what if they had taken something, the source of infection would have been me, as I was hanging out a lot in the city` (girl, 16 years)

The pandemic context and the measures taken by the authorities to limit the COVID-19 effects, which became by themselves a stress factor for adolescents, caused a fear related a prolonged lockdown, which could generate a loss of friendships, an event with a major effect on their emotional state.

`My biggest fear was to have an extremely long lockdown period and losing contact with my loved ones, losing my friends` (girl, 18 years)

The withdrawal period may also be considered as generating awareness in the mind of a developing adolescent. The need to analyze the received information, the fear to communicate in real life, finding out that in a virtual environment people tend to express themselves with no restrictions and to have a completely different personality than in real life were just a few of them.

`It made me realize... that you don't need to listen to everything all the time, that you don't need to let fear get to you, and that you're the one that needs to analyze things` (girl, 16 years)

`My fears during the pandemic were related to communication ... a fear that occurred back then ... I mean, even if I was talking with children while playing computer games, it was completely different. There you can say anything, you can pretend whatever you want, but in reality when you meet him you can see how he feels, you see his weaknesses, you look straight into his eyes...` (boy, 16 years)

Only one interviewee reported the fear of God, in the sense that she was aware of His power and the disorder of contemporary people was the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic.

`... I was afraid of God at that time. We had never lived before a time when man rebelled so much against God` (girl, 20 years)

Some of the respondents, especially the girls, stated they had been overwhelmed by emotions during the initial period of the pandemic, when

they were locked inside and this feeling is natural, as they were facing something new and they did not know how to manage it emotionally.

`It's in the nature of every human to feel overwhelmed in certain circumstances. It's just that I'm a very energetic person and I wasn't that upset` (girl, 16 years)

`I would cry sometimes, when I was at my limit, but not because I was sad or anything like that, just stress with all the things and it was the last straw` (girl, 16 years)

`I had some periods when I felt very overwhelmed by this situation and I saw it as if it would never end, ... fortunately they weren't that long, just some thoughts that appeared from time to time and I could quickly get rid of them` (girl, 18 years)

The positive aspects of the pandemic in the view of adolescents

The positive aspects related to the pandemic concerned both the personal and social side of an individual: a withdrawal period which was favorable for exam preparation, awareness of the importance of family and friendships, time for introspection, prayer, self-discovery and the relationship with God.

`For me this overlapped with my exam period and the good thing was that I got admitted in the high school I wanted` (boy, 16 years)

`Two months where I stayed with my parents and I was able to spend more time with them` (girl, 16 years)

`The fact that the moment I'm having right now I won't have it in the future` (girl, 18 years)

`I had more time for introspection, for thinking about who I am... how much love I've had for God, how I relate to Him...a time for more prayers, a time to rediscover myself` (girl, 20 years)

As regards the socio-educational aspects, the following were reported: an increased trust in science, a greater focus on personal hygiene, and also the return of Romanians back to their country and rediscovering the beauty of their own country.

`Maybe something to do with conspiracies, to make us trust science more and do a better research. Not to believe anybody and anything they say`. (boy, 17 years)

`...to obey some rules of conduct` (boy, 17 years)

`People have now more hygiene. People are no longer leaving the country in such high numbers as before. Everyone has come back and found the good side of Romania` (boy, 16 years)

When asked to describe what they see when they look in the mirror, the perspective on one's own life was depicted. Initially, this perspective took some of them by surprise, but then they tried to give an answer, which

implies that they did not have a clear enough self-image, or a particularly deep perspective on their own lives. The answers are quite diverse, alternating from very good to very poor opinions about one's own person. In general, the description addresses the deeper part of personality, and also the changing character, characteristic of adolescence.

`I'm pretty lonely, I wish I had more close friends` (boy, 17 years)

`it depends on the day, if I've had a nice day and I've felt good, I'm like: How good that it's me and what a beautiful life! but other times it's like I see an empty, soulless and lifeless...body` (boy, 16 years)

`a child trying to become an intellectual ... most of the time I'm satisfied with myself, although I'd like to change the anxiety I feel about talking to people" (boy, 17 years)

`I'm trying to be the best version of me` (boy, 17 years)

`I'm wondering if I can be better, if I couldn't do things better` (boy, 16 years)

`a person with quite a lot of potential who's trying her best to put it into action` (girl, 18)

`a human always changing, always perfectible, a human who wants to be better` (girl, 20 years)

When asked to describe their own life in one word, respondents reported terms such as: new, boring, school, interesting (reported twice), a chaos, `a disappointment and sometimes extraordinary`, interesting, unpredictable and adventurous (twice).

`something new... My life is constantly changing` (girl, 16 years old)

`My life is pretty boring` (boy, 17 years)

`I could say it's ups and downs... sometimes disappointment and other times I feel life is extraordinary (boy, 16 years)

`School probably, it's the central thing in my life`(boy, 17 years)

`Adventurous` (girl, 16 years)

`I'd say interesting and unpredictable` (girl, 18 years)

Life during the pandemic is described using words such as: *ordinary, boring, unpredictable, developing and `free but locked`*.

Limitations

Although it offers a broad perspective on the situation of the interviewed segment, qualitative research also has some limitations: it takes a lot of time, it requires a large volume of information, which is often difficult to collect and measure in coherent results, and it's limited to a relatively small number of individuals.

Based on the interpretation of a large data volume, we can say that the degree of objectivity is relative. The researcher has the opportunity to

direct the analysis from his/her own perspective, being difficult to obtain some objective results. Also, it should be mentioned that it is impossible to extend the research results to an entire population category, due to the limited number of respondents. We also admit the idea that the study results might not be conclusive enough, as the study involved a small number of people and did not allow an objective understanding of the phenomenon of resilience in adolescents and the causes of anxiety-depressive symptoms.

Conclusions

The general idea emerging from this study is that the pandemic, overcoming the problem of fear of the infection or the disease, especially for loved ones (Farris et al., 2021), was rather a generator of anxiety disorders in adolescents. Being an age with multiple physical, emotional, and also social changes, the stress factors generated by the pandemic had a significant impact, especially due to the fact that the major concern was closely related to the desire for socialization and group integration.

Although adolescents were affected in various ways, the virus itself was not the main source for different forms of anxiety but the measures taken by the authorities to prevent the pandemic impact.

Being isolated from their peer group caused in adolescents a sense of not belonging to the group and their own devaluation which, amplified by the multitude of negative information in the media, nurtured a climate of permanent tension and irascibility.

Online school, interaction on social media platforms and maintaining phone contact with the group were predisposing factors for developing addictions to virtual environment and technology (Blachnio et al., 2015). Without a strict control over the time and viewed content, adolescents had access to raw and unfiltered content, which altered their perception of reality. On the other hand, mental exhaustion caused the occurrence and persistence of a state of irritability.

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