

Paths and Strands: the feelings repressed by the frontline health professionals of the pandemic by COVID-19

Caminos y hebras: los sentimientos reprimidos por los profesionales de la salud de primera línea de la pandemia por COVID-19

Caminhos e vertentes: os sentimentos reprimidos pelos profissionais de saúde da linha de frente da pandemia pela COVID-19

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Abstract

The aim was to identify the feelings repressed by health professionals in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experience report carried out by nursing interns at a municipal health center in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The performance of this practice enabled the opportunity to listen to health professionals from different areas of expertise, in which it was possible to identify the feelings repressed by them during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience of six students from the penultimate period of the nursing graduation was narrated who, while fulfilling the mandatory internship time at a municipal health center, came across overworked professionals, with a high demand for services due to the consequences of the COVID pandemic -19. The physical and mental burden of health professionals, especially the nursing staff, is evident in this pandemic scenario. It is important, therefore, to have a more sensitive look at workers, so that they can express the feelings they experience, and thus mitigate the suffering in the face of physical and emotional exhaustion in dealing with the pandemic.

Descriptors: COVID-19; Nursing; Pandemic; Occupational Health.**Resumen**

El objetivo fue identificar los sentimientos reprimidos por los profesionales de la salud ante la pandemia COVID-19. Informe de experiencia realizado por pasantes de enfermería en un centro de salud municipal de la ciudad de Rio de Janeiro. La realización de esta práctica permitió la oportunidad de escuchar a profesionales de la salud de diferentes áreas de especialización, en las que fue posible identificar los sentimientos reprimidos por ellos durante la pandemia COVID-19. Se narró la experiencia de seis estudiantes del penúltimo período de la graduación de enfermería que, mientras cumplían el tiempo de internado obligatorio en un centro de salud municipal, se encontraron con profesionales con exceso de trabajo, con una alta demanda de servicios debido a las consecuencias de la pandemia de COVID -19. La carga física y mental de los profesionales de la salud, especialmente del personal de enfermería, es evidente en este escenario pandémico. Es importante, por tanto, tener una mirada más sensible a los trabajadores, para que puedan expresar los sentimientos que experimentan y así mitigar el sufrimiento ante el agotamiento físico y emocional al enfrentar la pandemia.

Descriptores: COVID-19; Enfermería; Pandemia; Salud del Trabajador.**Resumo**

Objetivou-se identificar os sentimentos reprimidos por profissionais de saúde, frente à pandemia do COVID-19. Relato de experiência realizado por internas de Enfermagem em um centro municipal de saúde no município do Rio de Janeiro. A realização dessa prática viabilizou a oportunidade de escuta dos profissionais de saúde de diferentes áreas de atuação, em que foi possível identificar os sentimentos reprimidos por estes durante a pandemia do COVID-19. Narrou-se a vivência de seis estudantes do penúltimo período da graduação de enfermagem que, ao cumprir o tempo de estágio obrigatório em um centro municipal de saúde, se depararam com profissionais sobrecarregados, com uma alta demanda de serviços devido às consequências da pandemia do COVID-19. É evidente a sobrecarga física e mental dos profissionais de saúde, sobretudo, da equipe de enfermagem diante desse cenário de pandemia. Torna-se importante, portanto, um olhar mais sensível para os trabalhadores, para que possam expressar os sentimentos vivenciados, e assim mitigar o sofrimento frente ao desgaste físico e emocional no enfrentamento da pandemia.

Descritores: COVID-19; Enfermagem; Pandemia; Saúde do Trabalhador.

Introduction

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov2), commonly known as COVID-19, a new species of coronavirus, is the cause of the pandemic that marked the international scene in 2020 and triggered a major challenge, not only for the public service and for health professionals, but also for political bodies around the world¹.

As it is still, in a way, a recent virus under study, the contagion and the number of individuals infected by COVID-19, especially in health professionals, have increased significantly¹.

Several classes of professionals are the protagonists of assistance in the front line of the pandemic, and, in view of this adversity, there was a significant change in the working conditions, workload and demand of these professionals, which made evident the increase in absenteeism, in addition to the fact that they deal with the unknown, which resulted in the accumulation of stressors, culminating in the impairment of the physical and mental health of these workers^{1,2}.

Nursing assumes its leading role in health care and its performance is recognized by the population, especially in this period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The process of caring for nursing professionals does not only involve technical activities, it also includes scientific knowledge, feelings and emotions¹.

The burden of nursing health professionals becomes inevitable given the proportion of the pandemic, given that there was a significant increase in demand at all levels of health care. However, it is challenging to provide holistic care, given the wear and tear given by the work overload to those responsible for this care¹.

This context arouses many feelings in society in general, especially in nursing professionals, since they are the professional category of evident importance in the front line in the fight against COVID-19, such as fear, anguish, apprehension, anger, feeling of impotence, sadness, among others¹.

These feelings are caused by uncertainty about the future, social isolation that often distances them from their families, in addition to physical exhaustion, professional devaluation and intense working hours that further reinforce the feelings experienced¹.

Thus, according to what has been exposed, this study has as its guiding question the following discussion: what were the feelings experienced and hidden by health professionals working on the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic? To answer this question, the following objective was defined: to identify the feelings repressed by health professionals in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This is a reflective and descriptive study, of the experience report type, carried out from the experience of six undergraduate nursing students from a university in the State of Rio de Janeiro. This report seeks to present the experiences lived during the internship period, during the activities of the discipline "Management of the Work Process

and Nursing Care", in the interval between February 8, 2021, and March 10, 2021.

The study was carried out in a primary health care unit located in the northern part of the city of Rio de Janeiro. This unit seeks to provide comprehensive health care to the population, through various services that are offered, such as individual and collective consultations, home visits, vaccination, some types of tests, dressings, family planning, among other services.

Ethical aspects were respected, since the institution and health professionals were not identified, and approval by the Research Ethics Committee was unnecessary because the experience report was developed by the undergraduate students who experienced the experience.

Experience Report

The internship is the last year of academic training in nursing, which comprises the 8th and 9th periods of graduation, and is the time when academics experience the supervised mandatory internship season. The supervised internship in the 8th period, in which the undergraduates were at the time, was divided into four cycles: cycle I - municipal health center and polyclinic; cycle II - family clinic; cycle III - medical clinic; and cycle IV - surgical clinic.

In the first cycle of activities and on the first day of practical field, through the subarea "Management of the Work Process and Nursing Care", a group of six students were allocated to a municipal health center and were assigned to carry out the situational diagnosis of the pre-established sectors, observing the physical, chemical, and biological risks of the unit in question.

The sectors and area destined to carry out the situational diagnosis were external area, vaccination room, dressing room and reception room. The group of six members was divided into two pairs, each pair staying in the vaccination room and the outdoor area. The two other inmates stayed one in the dressing room and one in the reception room.

Between February 8, 2021, and March 3, 2021, once a week, the inmates organized themselves so that everyone could have the experience of going through all sectors and thus add their observations to the findings of other members of the group. During field data collection, there were valuable opportunities to talk to the nursing staff working at that unit and many of their reports were impactful.

In the reception sector, a nurse issued the following sentence:

"I do it in addition to my work because I think about the patients, to make their lives easier, but I'm alone here. I can't perform the consultations like I used to do. I'm overloaded!"

At another time, she reports:

"The host turned everything! Also, the system has changed, we don't receive training and we have to fend for ourselves"

In addition to these factors, a second host nurse, who was allocated to the vaccination campaign against COVID-19, mentioned the lack of health professionals to meet the high demand, which directly impacts her workday,



reporting that she daily exceeds the the end of your business hours. In addition, she comments on her fear of being an employee of an outsourced company and emphasizes her employment instability.

Another professional from the reception team, who works as a nursing technician, describes how difficult it is to work in the face of this whole pandemic scenario and emphasizes that the feeling experienced has been fear: fear of contamination and, consequently, of becoming ill. of you, but also if your family members.

In vaccination, there are nursing professionals who are being assigned to administer the COVID-19 vaccine in homes for bedridden elderly. Due to the news of some nursing technicians administering vaccines without the immunizing agent in patients, the repercussion of this news made the population suspicious of health professionals and, according to the nursing technician's report, they are treating them badly. Upon arriving at the unit and discovering that she would stay in the home vaccination of bedridden elderly, the nursing technician vents with her colleagues and when she sees the student in the sector, she says:

"I didn't say good morning to you, sorry. Are you going to graduate? Look, good luck. I love what I do, but it's hard. Today (now) I don't advise anyone to do nursing".

Then she reinforces to her colleague:

"Call people, because if they don't answer I'm not going anywhere. I'm not here to be treated badly".

Such statements were expressed full of feelings, such as sadness, a lot of stress, tiredness, frustration, discouragement, and disappointment, which leads us to reflect on the mental health of these professionals who are on the front line. Thinking about solving a pandemic is essential, but what about professionals? Who will vaccinate? Who will host? Who will be at the bedside? If we don't look at them and provide proper care, we will lose the people who are the key to the entire intervention plan being effective.

In another scenario, the professional who was changing the dressings also reports a feeling of tiredness and externalizes to the student, when she arrives in the field to monitor her activities, the phrase she most repeats to the students who stay with her:

"Thank God I'm going to retire, I'm close to rest. I am very tired".

The activities of this first cycle ended on March 10, 2021, and, with that, a report regarding the situational diagnosis of the municipal health center was delivered to the board. Due to the professionals' reports, it was suggested that workers receive psychological support, moments of relaxation with stretching, moments of distraction with dancing, among other activities that could help reduce the pressure and overload that workers have received.

Discussion

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the historical demands of nursing become even more evident, especially in terms of working conditions, length of working hours, staff dimensioning, remuneration and social visibility of the category. Added to this, the overload, the increased risk of contamination, the concern with transmitting the disease to family members, insufficient individual protective equipment and ethical dilemmas experienced by the nursing staff further impact the physical and mental health of these workers³.

During a pandemic, the number of people who may experience shakes in their mental health may be greater than the number who are affected by the infection⁴. This research highlighted the importance of reflecting on the mental health condition of nursing team professionals, and the need to develop strategies capable of identifying their feelings, however small they may seem, valuing their efforts to mitigate the impact of these unpleasant sensations that interfere so much in the care process.

Nursing assumes such importance in health care, through a holistic, humanized, and equitable care. It is essential that nurses provide the user with care and active listening, as they deal with psychological suffering, related to death, anguish and pain, that is, their work requires a high level of demand, not only in the physical sphere, but as emotional, which is opposed to inadequate working conditions and unsatisfactory remuneration, circumstances that contribute to excessive stress, capable of causing physical and mental exhaustion⁵.

The World Health Organization (WHO) finds that these professionals, faced with all these issues, show extremely high levels of anxiety and fear, resulting in serious mental health problems and, consequently, an increase in cases of Burnout Syndrome, in addition to cause associated stress and depression⁵. Furthermore, the WHO emphasizes that the nursing team makes all the difference in health services and that, without these professionals, it would be unfeasible to fight epidemics, pandemics and achieve success in achieving comprehensive and universal health care⁶.

Burnout Syndrome is defined as work stress that presents itself through the worker's not only physical, but also emotional exhaustion. Work overload and low pay are among the causes that constitute nursing as one of the professional categories with the highest cases of this syndrome⁷.

Nursing professionals have encountered obstacles in the search for professional valuation that can compromise their work due to the lack of motivation generated by this factor, which may reflect negatively on the care provided⁷, as can be observed when the nursing technician wishes the student good luck in following the profession, due to the poor treatment it has received from some patients, the lack of professional recognition and the anxiety of other professionals about retiring.

This study brought results like another experience report that aimed to report the feelings and experiences of nursing professionals who worked in a public hospital in the fight against COVID-19. The results of the study found show



that about the feelings provoked by the process of coping with the pandemic, fear is the most notable among professionals, regardless of the hospital area, particularly related to the fear of transmitting the virus to relatives⁶.

In addition, the professionals certified that the pandemic significantly changed the way of working and that the repercussions of the pandemic will still last for some time, impacting the quality-of-care provided⁶.

This study presented reports that corroborate the intrinsic risk of developing emotional disorders and additional damage to health resulting from occupational stress and highlighted the need for management to be more active regarding the mental health of its workers, given that the better the health status of the professionals, the better the care they will provide to their patients⁴.

An experience report found, which aimed to report coping strategies of COVID-19 of a Primary Health Care Health Center in a municipality in Bahia, reinforced the importance of mental health care for health workers. In view of this, the development of alternative care strategies with an emphasis on the mental health of professionals was established through complementary integrative practices, such as: meditation, auriculotherapy, breathing exercises, creating videos from social media applications and musicalization⁸.

Research shows that Complementary Integrative Practices are being increasingly used not only to reduce stress, but also to prevent the onset of diseases or minimize their symptoms, in addition to restoring balance and peace of mind of individuals^{9,10}.

Conclusion

Given the above, the physical and mental overload of health professionals is noticeable the nursing team in front of this pandemic context. In view of this, this

professional category shows feelings relevant to this scenario, such as sadness, stress, fatigue, frustration, and discouragement.

In this context, the health and quality of life of workers must be critically evaluated, as it presupposes the essentiality of possible interventions with the main objective of making the feeling of professional frustration unfeasible, mainly due to excessive stress, which is an elementary factor for the well-known "Burnout Syndrome", which leads to the professional's illness, directly influencing their work process, since the mental health of professionals is essential for the execution of an appropriate and effective work.

Thus, it is possible to see that working conditions directly influence the health of workers, who are daily exposed to demands and demands of the work process that, over time, generate wear and tear. Therefore, these professionals constantly assume the position of the individual who needs care, contrary to the purpose of their performance, which is based on the provision of care, since, to provide quality care, mental well-being is essential.

In this report, many professionals showed feelings of concern about the future of the profession, due to all the difficulties presented, which can significantly interfere with the health of the classes involved in this context. The lack of recognition, fear and the overload of professionals seen daily, made the work that was previously rewarding, said as sacrificing due to insecurity, fear, and fatigue.

Therefore, it is worth emphasizing the importance of a more sensitive look at the workers involved in care and the ability to recognize that these are often the ones who need care, thus providing a space for speech, especially empathetic, so that they can externalizing everything that afflicts them can provide relief in the face of the emotional burden experienced daily.

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