

MENTAL HEALTH IN TIMES OF COVID-19: POLICY BRIEF

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1. Issue

The COVID-19 caused profound disruptive changes worldwide. Mental health (MH) and subjective wellbeing (WB) have been particularly affected. Several factors can contribute to individual vulnerability, namely the perceived uncertainty, the strict measures adopted by the governments, the socioeconomic hardship and the direct effects of the virus [1-4].

2. Description

The SM-COVID19 project [5,6] aimed to characterize the MH and subjective WB of the general population and to identify vulnerable groups. The project supported a set of recommendations targeting policy makers as a contribute to the mitigation of psychological suffering during the first lockdown in Portugal due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Lessons

✓ Psychological screening and surveillance is of paramount importance in the peri- and post-pandemic period.

✓ Mental health and subjective wellbeing protection measures should integrate promotion, prevention and intervention dimensions by design, focusing on identified vulnerable groups.

3. Results

The research team produced an evidence-based Policy Brief [7] with a set of recommendations for immediate action during the first lockdown in Portugal.

Three-folded recommendations were proposed, namely:

Promotion - Empower citizens and increase social cohesion

- Improve MH literacy
- Promote MH-related healthy habits (eating, physical activity, sleep, etc.)
- Strengthen intersectoral action for MH promotion at the local level

Prevention - Identify vulnerable groups and intervene in a timely manner

- MH screenings in various settings (primary care, workplaces, schools, etc.)
- Outreaching and guidance for vulnerable groups
- Increase social support networks (ONG's, support groups, hotlines, etc.)

Intervention - Strengthen mental health care

- Increase and allocate multidisciplinary teams to MH services
- Improve financing mechanisms for MH services
- Integrate digital health technologies to deliver personalized MH care

Main messages

In a pandemic context, MH and subjective WB surveillance is of paramount importance due to individual and socioeconomic burden.

Health Observatories can and should have an active role in this public health area, to mitigate potential negative impacts, specially identifying vulnerable groups.

