

# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL STATE OF NURSES

The monograph *The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Psycho-emotional State of Nurses* is an in-depth analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological state of healthcare workers and, more specifically, on the psycho-emotional state of nurses.

For more than two years, the COVID-19 pandemic affected all areas of our lives — work, education, social life, economy, healthcare, culture and more.

It has caused fear and anxiety for millions of people around the world, due to the loss of loved ones, social isolation, economic hardship, worries about the future.

The monograph offers a historical analysis of pandemics, tracing in detail the development of the most recent pandemic of COVID-19 in Bulgaria.

The analysis aims to outline the dynamics of medical activities aimed at limiting the spread of infection and all medical activities related to diagnosis, follow-up, treatment and care of patients. The study focuses on the place and role of nurses in these events and their impact on their psycho-emotional state.

Against the background of a general shortage of nurses in Bulgaria and the increasing and rapidly changing demands on institutions during the pandemic, increased levels of occupational stress and frequent symptoms of physical and emotional burnout were observed among nurses.

Strict measures to limit the risk of contamination, the inconvenience of wearing special protective clothing, the need for physical isolation, which makes it difficult to ensure the comfort of the patients under a nurse's care, vigilance at all times, strict procedures at work, etc., compounded the mental strain on healthcare professionals, especially nurses.

Higher demands at the workplace, including long working hours, an increase in the number of patients requiring care, the need to update work algorithms and develop new ones in line with best practice, have worsened the psycho-emotional state of nurses.

In order to achieve the aim of the study, in addition to systematic historical analysis of literature, documentary and sociological methods, work in focus group was mainly used to gather qualitative information on feelings, emotions, and experiences.

In the interviews conducted using focus groups, professionals reported an increased workload due to chronic understaffing, exacerbated by colleagues becoming infected and ill during the pandemic.

Lack of social support on account of social isolation, which limits the ability to engage in favourite pastimes, acts as a compensatory mechanism for physical and mental fatigue.

It is not uncommon for health workers to be 'shunned' by friends and acquaintances because of the nature and conditions of their work, contributing to the exacerbation of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, loneliness and alienation.

Extended psycho-emotional involvement with patients' problems also leads to burnout, which nurses find difficult to compensate with rest.

The conflict of social roles that nurses play puts them under indescribable pressure. On the one hand, they have to fulfil their mission to protect people's health and well-being while, on the other hand, they have to fulfil their social roles in their family and friendship circles.

The monograph logically identifies the main sources of psycho-emotional problems associated with the pandemic and their manifestation in the personal and professional life of nurses.

As a result of the psycho-emotional strain, the nurses in the study also reported manifestations of poorer health, such as elevated blood pressure, sleep disturbance, gastrointestinal complaints, exacerbation of chronic diseases and newly diagnosed diseases.

Given the extreme environment during the pandemic, psychological interventions for healthcare workers were few and far between, achieving minimal results.

This provides a rationale for developing appropriate and timely interventions to address post-traumatic stress and mental health disorders among nurses.

The monograph sets out recommendations for restoring the psycho-emotional state of nurses.

The scientific and applied approaches to addressing pandemic-related mental health problems and the interventions needed to restore the mental and emotional health of healthcare workers are presented.

The accumulated evidence in this area is a prerequisite for hospital management to look for new opportunities for targeted prevention, management and treatment of problems of disturbed psycho-emotional balance.

In addition to research material, the monograph is intended to serve as a methodological guide for health care managers in the process of crisis management, as well as for the prevention and reduction of work stress at the personal and organisational level.

Healthcare workers represent a large group of employees in Bulgaria's economy, meaning that the issue of work-related stress and other mental health risks is of particular concern.

It is therefore particularly important and beneficial to invest in promoting mental health in the sector.

Psychosocial risks and stress at work are among the most problematic issues in occupational health and safety. This was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on the health of individuals, organisations and the economy as a whole.

The recommendations based on the study can also serve as a starting point for working with psychologically distressed medical personnel in other similar crises.