

WHY SHOULD WE PRIORITIZE A GREATER PRESENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSIONALS IN PUBLIC HEALTH?

UCM-Group 5 Chair Against Stigma

Since the pandemic caused by SARS-CovV-2 or Covid-19 began in March 2020, the Spanish health system has been overwhelmed by the great pressure that its professionals have had to bear. This pressure has not been less in the case of the field of mental health, which is also suffering from a patent lack of both resources and number of professionals. According to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE in Spanish), in 2020 the ratio of psychologists per 1,000 inhabitants in Spain was 0.73. In other words, there was not even one psychologist for every 1,000 inhabitants. Even taking into account that the highest rate of psychologists with a health specialty is in Madrid (1.74 per 1000 inhabitants), it is clear that this ratio is still insufficient.

The longitudinal study Psi-Covid-19 of the UCM-Group 5 Chair Against Stigma (González-Sanguino et al., 2021) together with other national (Valiente et al., 2020) and international studies (Cénat et al., 2021; Mazza et al., 2020; Tanoue et al., 2020) reflect a worrying worsening of psychological symptomatology aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Among other aspects, there is an increase in anxiety and depressive symptomatology, as well as an increase in sleep problems and post-traumatic symptomatology in the general population, in addition to an increase in feelings of loneliness and an increase in the perception of discrimination in some population groups.

The Psychological Association of Madrid estimates that, in the last year, requests for consultation have grown between 20% and 30% in the Community of Madrid, due to the consequences of Covid-19 (extracted from *El País*, April 5, 2021). On the other hand, the Spanish Agency of Pediatrics states that the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected the mental health of young people, a fact that is reflected in the pediatric emergencies of Spanish hospitals (extracted from Agencia EFE, 2021). The longitudinal study Psi-Covid-19 analyzed the use of mental health services by the Spanish population between March 2020 and March 2021, finding that 40% of the sample revealed having had a mental health problem in the last 12 months. Of that 40%, only 23% reported having received some form of face-to-face or distance treatment. Those who did not seek help reported not having done so because they felt they could handle the problems on their own (40%), that their problems got better on their own (20%), or because they could not afford to pay for treatment (20%). A fact to take into account is that the sample reflects having received mostly face-to-face or distance psychotherapy, together making up around 62% of the care received. On the other hand, psychiatric or pharmacological treatments were present in around 25% of the cases.

These data show how the pandemic has had devastating effects on the mental health of the Spanish population, making it necessary to have easier access to psychological care services and a greater presence of psychology both at hospital level and in primary care services. Devora Kestel, Director of Mental Health and Substance Use at the World Health Organization, explained on July 5 at the El Escorial Summer Course entitled "Stigma in times of Pandemic", that the inclusion of mental health services in primary and

secondary care is necessary to cover people's health universally, thus saving countless lives. In this same course, Kestel revealed the need to make calls to action and to make it clear that mental health is a priority.

Therefore, it is important to include a greater number of psychology professionals in public health in the near future, specifically in primary care, an area that has been particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The increase in the number of positions for resident intern psychologists, as well as a greater presence of psychologists in public and private health centers should be prioritized in order to address the worsening mental health of the general Spanish population.

For more information on the Chair, visit www.contraelestigma.com.

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