

Community anxiety:

what we learned from the pandemic?



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WHO IS THIS BOOKLET FOR?

This booklet was developed for Primary Health Care (PHC) professionals who work directly with communities and wish to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health.

Do you remember what the beginning of the pandemic was like?

To revisit that period, **let's meet Aline.**

At the beginning of 2020, Aline worked, took care of her household and family, and went about her daily routine as usual. When the first news about the virus emerged, she became worried, but she had no idea how much her life was about to change.

With the arrival of COVID-19 came social distancing, fear of becoming ill, financial insecurity, major changes to daily life, and constant exposure to distressing news.

Over time, Aline began living in a constant state of alertness. She felt physically tense, worried about many different situations, and found it very difficult to relax—even when she was safe.





Even after COVID-19 cases declined and daily activities gradually resumed, Aline realized that she did not feel like herself again. Persistent worry, constant tension, and difficulty relaxing remained part of her daily life.

Have you met people like Aline during your consultations?

Many people seek care because of physical complaints - such as insomnia, palpitations, muscle pain, fatigue, or nonspecific symptoms - without recognizing that these may be related to anxiety.

Recognizing these signs during the first contact is essential for identifying emotional distress and providing appropriate mental health care.

Let's recap what happened?

2019

DEC:

First cases in
Wuhan, China.

2021

JAN:

Start of vaccination

MAR:

highest number of deaths
recorded in the country

APR:

Gamma variant

JUL:

Delta variant

DEC:

Omicron variant

2020

FEB:

First case of COVID-19
in Brazil

MAR:

WHO declares a pandemic;
social isolation; mask-wearing
and rise in cases

2023

2024

MAY:

pandemic slows
down – end of public
health emergency

2022

easing of restrictions;
vaccine booster shots

2025

2026

post-pandemic;
emotional hangover

What happened?

Understanding the past

Even before the pandemic, many people in Brazil were already struggling with anxiety—many worries and that feeling of having “a head full of thoughts.” Aline felt that way too.

When COVID-19 arrived, all of this became even more difficult. Isolation, the fear of catching the disease, changes in routine, and uncertainty about the future took a heavy toll on our emotions. People began to feel more insecure, tired, and had trouble relaxing.

In other words,

the pandemic didn't create this suffering from scratch: it exacerbated a situation that already existed.



A Mental Health Pandemic as Well: What Have We Seen, and What Do We Still See?

When we think about COVID-19, we often remember the virus, face masks, and vaccination. However, the pandemic also had a significant impact on the population's mental health. Many people began experiencing persistent worry, a constant sense of alertness, and difficulty relaxing. **Even after the number of cases declined and daily activities gradually resumed, these symptoms did not disappear for everyone.**

Healthcare services continue to care for individuals experiencing emotional distress related to their experiences during the pandemic. **This reminds us that the pandemic affected more than just that specific period—it left emotional scars that continue to shape many people's lives today.**



What do our studies show?

1

Worry snowballed:

Many people entered a cycle of worry, and when worry becomes nonstop, anxiety can increase even more.

2

Uncertainties increased anxiety:

A future full of doubts — about health, work, and money — further intensified anxiety symptoms.

3

Things didn't end overnight:

For many people, the body took time to realize that the danger had subsided, and anxiety persisted, even as cases began to decline and vaccines became available.

4

People are affected differently:

Women and young people were among those who felt the emotional impact of the pandemic the most, experiencing higher levels of anxiety.

5

The body feels it too:

Palpitations, sweaty palms, and trouble sleeping were common during this period. It was as if the body were constantly trying to protect itself from a threat.





What have we learned?

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most challenging periods we have ever experienced, but it also taught us important lessons. One of the most important? **Caring for our mental health is just as important as caring for our physical health.**

In Primary Health Care, this period reinforced the importance of recognizing emotional distress as an integral part of comprehensive health care. Providing compassionate care, practicing active and empathetic listening, and identifying early signs of anxiety can contribute to timely interventions and help prevent the worsening of psychological distress.

The way we cope with difficult situations also makes a difference. Resilience—our ability to adapt to adversity—can serve as a protective factor against anxiety. With the support of healthcare professionals, Aline gradually realized that ignoring her emotional distress would not make it disappear. Little by little, she began to:

Practice self-compassion: During her follow-up care in Primary Health Care, Aline came to understand that recovering from such a challenging period takes time. Learning to respect her own limits and letting go of excessive self-criticism helped reduce her tension and enabled her to cope more effectively with everyday challenges.

Rebuild routines and hope: Little by little, Aline resumed activities that promoted her well-being, such as going for walks, reading, and spending time with people who were important to her. Re-establishing enjoyable daily routines and setting new goals helped reduce her anxiety and restore a sense of hope.

Strengthen support networks: With encouragement from the healthcare team, Aline began talking more openly with family members and trusted friends. The support of her social network, together with ongoing follow-up care provided by health services, played an important role in helping her feel supported and better equipped to cope with this difficult period.

Important reminder:

These lessons remain relevant today. In Primary Health Care, guiding people in **copng strategies, strengthening support networks, and providing compassionate and supportive care** can make a meaningful difference in promoting mental health and preventing the worsening of anxiety symptoms.

Looking to the future

We must not allow the experiences of this period to fade into collective memory. The pandemic left emotional scars that may still be present among people receiving care through health services. Looking back on what happened allows us to acknowledge the emotional distress people experienced and provide care that is more responsive to the needs of the community.

The pandemic also taught us that mental health care must be an ongoing priority, not only during times of crisis. This includes strengthening public policies, expanding access to mental health services, promoting prevention and health education initiatives, and encouraging self-care and mutual support within the community.



What to do?

Recognize and observe signs of emotional distress: Be attentive to signs such as excessive worry, persistent tension, difficulty relaxing, sleep disturbances, or physical complaints with no apparent organic cause.

Practice active and empathetic listening: Creating a welcoming environment, listening without judgment, and validating the individual's emotional distress help build trust and facilitate mental health care.

Seek reliable information: Expanding your knowledge about anxiety can strengthen your professional practice. In addition to this booklet, other educational resources are available to support the identification, guidance, and follow-up of individuals experiencing anxiety symptoms.

Access other materials





Seeking Support

When anxiety symptoms significantly interfere with an individual's daily functioning or persist over time, it is important to ensure ongoing follow-up and, when appropriate, coordinate referrals to other services within the health care network.

You can coordinate care with services such as:

- Psychology teaching clinics (usually free);
- UBS in your city;
- CAPS (Psychosocial Care Centers);
- CRAS.



Let's review what we've learned in this booklet?

1

Anxiety symptoms may emerge or worsen during periods of prolonged uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

2

Excessive worry, persistent tension, difficulty relaxing, sleep disturbances, and physical complaints may be signs of emotional distress and should be recognized during patient encounters.

3

Providing compassionate care, practicing active and empathetic listening, identifying anxiety symptoms early, and strengthening support networks all contribute to more comprehensive mental health care.

4

Primary Health Care (PHC) plays a fundamental role in promoting mental health, preventing the worsening of anxiety symptoms, and coordinating care with other health services whenever necessary.

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