



## **APSA - Congreso de la Asociación Argentina de Psiquiatras - Virtual - Setiembre 2020 - Buenos Aires - Argentina**

Title:

Psychotherapy in times of Pandemic What, how and when to intervene?

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### **Current context**

We have been and are experiencing a natural disaster, with global consequences of unknown dimensions.

I add at the time of sending this document, that the participation of Argentina together with Mexico in the development and distribution of the vaccine for COVID developed in Oxford has been announced.

This milestone changes what refers to uncertainty, since it allows us to visualize a 'light at the end of the tunnel', and an end to this Pandemic. Nevertheless, what follows, may help us in understanding the psychological situation in this context.

What is a natural disaster ?

It is a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, economic or environmental losses that exceed the ability of the community or society to manage it, by their own means. For example: earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, terrorist acts, plagues, plagues, pandemics and other natural disasters

Studies carried out on the psychological impact of different types of natural disasters, show that psychosocial interventions have not always been beneficial. It is the case of the "debriefing" practiced in focus groups after the attack on the Twin Towers, or the case of psychological treatments for people who go through normal griefs, to cite only few examples from Evidence-Based Psychotherapies (Lillienfeld, 2007).

This raises an alert when thinking about psychosocial interventions that are beneficial for patients and general population at large.

### **The therapist**

One of the most important aspects to take into account in order to face what kind of psychotherapeutic help may be beneficial in this context, is that this is the first time that therapists are in the same situation or context as the patients are, and this is a very relevant aspect to consider when thinking about how to help.

### **Uncertainty and information processing**

What specifically impacts psychological functioning in the context of a natural disaster is, in addition to the losses at different levels, the employment, economic and or financial difficulties that it entails; is the sudden increase in uncertainty and danger.

From the perspective of Cognitive Psychology, we know that the mind is organized around the construction of meanings, and that in order to function properly in relation to the

challenges posed by reality, we need to organize these meanings coherently; reducing uncertainty to be able to act accordingly.

The adequate decoding of information will be the way in which we reach the construction of meanings that will guide us towards effective action.

How to generate certainties or explanations in the midst of so much uncertainty?

The first days of the quarantine implementation, towards the end of March, we received an email from Marvin Goldfried, an authority on Psychotherapy and Integration of Psychotherapy, founder of the SEPI (Society for the Exploration of Psychotherapy), based in NYC. The email contained a video made by the head of the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) at a NYC Hospital, where he explained in great detail how to avoid getting infected and why. His explanation was clear and concise, adequately sizing the dangers and how to avoid them. Having attended tens of thousands of patients to that day, he was not infected. That day, after watching the video, we began to visualize the light through the tunnel because, in the face of so much uncertainty, we had found accurate and validated information to begin to face it. Avoid contagion and spreading.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YitWZj9QhdQ>

Although it is now known information, in those first moments it was clarifying and therefore, brought reassurance in the face of so much uncertainty . It also allowed us to verify that as we can construct meanings, for example, what behaviors to adopt in order not to become infected or spread the virus, uncertainty is immediately reduced, and consequently; tension, stress, and anguish are reduced.

Given the importance of the quality of the information for the construction of adequate meanings, at the level of mental processing, another important aspect to take into account is the quality, frequency and intentionality of the information that we process in the context of a Pandemic. Information that promotes fear and panic is not the same as the one that promotes reality data and how and what we have to prevent ourselves from.

As therapists, we know that it is the mental representation of the event and not the event in itself what is going to outline the experience of suffering.

### **The collective mental representation**

Since the ancient Greeks we know that it is the interpretation of the event and not so much the event itself that promotes the way we are going to experience it.

From the different modern catastrophes, a huge number of authors have given different types of insights, psychological, sociological, anthropological, economic, and philosophical about social representations in natural disasters.

To name a few, Voice (2014) draws our attention to the way a natural disaster can be conceptualized. He talks about 3 aspects:

1) metaphysical and theological aspects, prophecies or apocalypse. This is where the spiritual dimension comes into play to understand the disaster, as divine punishment, as apocalypse.

2) ethical aspects. This is where the behaviors of the people appear, the responsibility of each one, also the behaviors of the health or care agents, the responsibility of each one and the performance. The decision-making in 'triage', and other ethical questions are important.

3) political - philosophical aspects. This is where institutions and governments appear, in relation to the coercive measures to be taken during and after the disaster, what is known as 'governance' and the way institutions are taking charge of the consequences and the reconstruction after the disaster.

### **The social problem perspective**

Naomi Zack (2020) draws attention to the way in which natural disasters make inequities more visible, and alerts us to the need for society to prepare for a social response to disaster, appealing to collective responsibility and solidarity.

### **The metaphor of the Black Swan and other metaphors**

Nassim Taleb, a philosopher and economist born in Lebanon, a naturalized American, alerts about the impossibility of relying solely on the predictability of events, as based on mathematical models. The "black swan" is a metaphor to show that the history of humanity passes between predictable periods that can be translated into mathematical models, and others that do not. And it is the latter who are responsible for the change.

What is relevant about this insight for this Pandemic is that, in every crisis, even the most disruptive, there is an opportunity, and that the most disruptive moments for humanity were also those that preceded the greatest changes and advances. This is where the possibility for Psychotherapy begins.

More recently, a young Malaysian poet and politician tells us about different metaphors to understand the Pandemic, not only that of a war, but also that of a transformation towards a more prepared and more ecologically designed world.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/aaron\\_maniam\\_new\\_ways\\_to\\_understand\\_life\\_in\\_a\\_pandemic](https://www.ted.com/talks/aaron_maniam_new_ways_to_understand_life_in_a_pandemic)

What is relevant in all this for the purposes of thinking about Psychotherapy in times of Pandemic, is the personal meaning of disaster that each one, collectively and individually, can build and from there, and the development of the ability to transform a negative experience into an opportunity.

### **What is the role of Psychotherapy in the COVID-19 disaster?**

From our underlying Bio - Psycho - Social Model to understand disease, it was never better reflected the importance of the influence of the context in the multiplicity of factors that intervene in the determination of a good result of a Psychotherapy. There are currently a large number of studies being carried out to measure the psychological impact of this Pandemic. Today we have many research resources in scientific psychology and psychotherapy. To cite some of them, there is the famous article in The Lancet (Brooks, Samantha K; Webster, Rebecca K; Smith, Louise E; Woodland, Lisa; Wessely, Simon; Greenberg, Neil; Rubin, Gideon James (2020) where the authors make a historical overview of different pandemics and the psychological impacts of quarantine.

Similarly, not enough time has passed to investigate the impact psychological medium and long term since we are still immersed in it.

Psychotherapy as a psychosocial phenomenon is embedded in this reality and it is crossed by these circumstances in its mere conceptualization. The derivations are almost obvious:

a)As has been pointed out "ut supra", this is the first time that we, as therapists, are immersed in the same context as our patients.

b)Certain level of anxiety, sadness, emotional or physiological deregulation, confusion or weariness is expected or even normal, given the sudden raise in uncertainty; and must not be considered psychopathological symptoms .

c) Although it is necessary first of all to accept the situation in order to implement the mechanisms that we have to adapt in a functional way, we know that it is transitory and that at some point it will pass.

d) A certain degree of fear is logical and expected, given that there is a real danger of contagion, but panic already constitutes a cognitive distortion and would imply psychopathological condition, which must be addressed with the appropriate tools.

e) We may identify behaviors or habits that are healthier than others in order to comply with the recommendations of the Public Health authorities. In this vein, psychoeducational techniques are very useful, allowing us to elaborate understandable messages to reach verifiable results.

### **Factors involved in the psychotherapeutic process**

Lambert & Ongles (2013) identified the incidence of different factors in the outcome of psychotherapies in normal times. We know that only 15% of the variability of the factors that intervene in the good result of Psychotherapy is due to theoretical models and techniques, another 15% is due to expectations and placebo effects, 30% is due to factors of the therapeutic relationship and the remaining 40% to factors of patient characteristics and extra-therapeutic events.

In turn, Barlow (2006) conceptualized two types of psychological treatment, the distinction of which is essential when establishing a therapeutic objective. On the one hand, psychological interventions, inserted in the health system, compatible with the notions of psychopathology and pathophysiology; and on the other hand, psychotherapy, not necessarily inserted in the health system, compatible with the notions of personal development.

This discrimination serves the purpose of being able to establish the objectives of the treatment, and in the therapeutic process they interact with each other.

What is relevant about this is to have tools to establish a therapeutic objective, which is particularly important in this circumstance so as not to incur in unnecessary or harmful treatments; or in different types of stigmatization.

### **Designing a psychotherapeutic treatment in Pandemic**

First of all, to be able to design a treatment, which implies building a therapeutic relationship, an objective and eventually phases or stages, it is necessary to identify the problems.

In this context of Pandemic, we must discriminate if the problems are due to the impact of the Pandemic or previous psychopathological situations, since each of these situations will imply a different approach.

In case they are due to the impact of the Pandemic, it is also necessary to discriminate if they are expected reactions (fear, anguish, sadness, despair in moderate degrees); or they are reactions that indicate some kind of underlying psychopathology. This is also important because it will involve different types of techniques to implement and different types of therapeutic bond.

It is also necessary, whenever possible, to assess the level of severity of the disturbance, to determine whether to combine psychotherapy with pharmacotherapy, or if the online setting is sufficient or if it is necessary to work in person.

Psychoeducation in healthy behaviors, changes in lifestyle and habits, counseling in conflictive coexistence situations, adherence to health care measures and advice on the information on the measures given by the State and degree of compliance with these, they will necessarily be present in Psychotherapy in Pandemic.

Although the situation of preventive isolation or quarantine may trigger underlying psychopathologies or aggravate existing ones, it is important not to stigmatize the patient and not to stereotype their unique experience at this special moment. It is also a fact that, at some point, this situation will end.

### **Main objective of Psychotherapy during Pandemic**

If we agree on the fact that the mental representation of an event is what motivates the behaviors, feelings, thinking patterns and beliefs of an individual at a given time, the general objective of Psychotherapy in times of Pandemic should be help the patient to find a path for transformation towards a better future, whether in the individual or even for future generations.

Different authors speak about the transformative capacity of disasters, including beyond the current generation.

### **Specific goals**

- Encourage the emergence of resilience while still accepting a level of negative emotion (fear - panic, stress, depression, coexistence problems, hopelessness ... etc.)
- Discover the opportunities that the crisis brings
- Reorder "unfinished business", as far as possible
- Regain links with growth possibilities
- Time to reflect
- Take perspective on your own life and projects and be encouraged to try new horizons or deepen the journey
- Help reduce subjective discomfort and improve lifestyle / quality of life
- Help in the reconstruction, if necessary, of the financial situation

In short, promoting Remoralization, which is, from Frank James onwards, the general therapeutic factor to be present as an index of improvement in all Psychotherapies. It refers to the ability of individuals to think about a better future, to imagine a transformation from the crisis and losses to new opportunities, greater confidence in themselves and those around them, feeling capable, valuable and useful to society at the same time. There is an evaluation measure of the Remoralization (Remoralization Scale) that we are currently validating for clinical and non-clinical population in the context of Pandemic at the University of Flores.

Last but not least, the health and emotional state of the therapist will influence how he or she can help the patient to achieve this.

As a final reflection, to put an end, it is not true that "everything in the past was better", but rather, "the best is yet to come".

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