


Editorial: The COVID-19 Pandemia

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Citation: Scheidt CE. **Editorial: The COVID-19 Pandemia.** *Int J Body Mind Culture* 2021; 8(2): 75-7.

Received: 05 Mar. 2021

Accepted: 29 Mar. 2021

Our experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and its sequelae on all aspects of our social, cultural, and economic life have lasted more than a year. During the past year many countries around the globe have had to cope with the enormous challenges imposed by the pandemic on almost all aspects of life. Millions of deaths, severely injured patients, and disability due to long term consequences of the disease are the costs of the pandemic, not to forget the burden of the social and economic stress under which large social groups still have to suffer.

Obviously, hospitals and health care systems are a focal point of the crisis in times of pandemic. Due to their exposure in the care of infected patients, medical personnel are at a considerably higher risk of infection. This led in many countries to a situation in which the death rates of the medical staff exceeded significantly that of the general population. Now after more than a year and towards the end of the third wave in many countries, healthcare workers are suffering from fatigue and burn-out. The ongoing confrontation with a large number of patients dying or suffering severely and over a long period in intensive care results in feelings of desperation and numbness. It is not only the result of work overload, but also the human misery that eats away at the nerves and souls of the medical staff.

If there is one aspect of the pandemic that could give rise to hope for a better world it would be the fact that the global nature of the disease has led to a growing awareness that this disaster can only be controlled by means of global solidarity. Otherwise the risk of an ongoing spread of new mutations can hardly be eliminated. Since the virus does not care about borders, the danger of new outbreaks of the pandemic remains as long as there is mobility across continents and borders. Therefore, it seems clear that a successful strategy against the disease cannot be a national or isolated one, but must be a global strategy. In addition, the discourse on the experiences regarding the impact of the pandemic on people's health, the observations of medical treatments, and the organization of healthcare systems have all become topics of common interest around the world. The awareness of a common

global threat comparable to the climate change might help to realize the need for international cooperation. COVID-19 has become a common point of reference around the world both in politics and science, which is reflected in the enormously increasing number of publications in the international scientific literature.

The articles collected in the current volume of the *Journal of Body, Mind, and Culture* give an impression of the multiple facets of the COVID-19 pandemic and its sequelae. The aim of the present volume was to collect contributions from different countries and cultures reflecting the respective experiences and situations regarding the pandemic. Sollmann and Feihuan for example report on their observations of COVID-19 in China, where the pandemic started. In China, but also in many other countries of the world, the health care systems turned out to be insufficiently equipped to cope with the pandemic. The initial hit by the virus therefore was severe. Due to the immense efforts to develop vaccines and to improve the health care systems, the infections and death rates in many countries gradually decreased. The focus of attention therefore shifted towards the psychosocial sequelae of the pandemic and the disadvantages of the lock-down strategy. A panel of American psychologists delineated three reasons why the mental health consequences of the pandemic are so difficult to cope with (Gruber et al., 2020). First, the pandemic is long-term and widespread with an uncertain end. Second, COVID-19 is a multidimensional stressor, affecting individual, family, educational, occupational, and medical systems. And third, “the protections needed to safeguard against infection necessarily, but ironically, block access of protective factors that are known to reduce the effects of stress (e.g., enjoyable distractions, behavioral activation, social relationships) because they are difficult to employ while adhering to stay-at-home and social-distancing mandates” (Gruber et al., 2020). All these factors have contributed to the deleterious effects of the pandemic on mental health. As the paper on challenges in the clinical education environment illustrates, the stress due to COVID-19 not only affected nurses and medical staff, but also medical students. In a qualitative interview study, five main themes emerged as most important, which were problems in medical education, work conflicts, future professional challenges, and challenges related to institutional issues and issues of stigma.

However, we should be aware that although the problems caused by Corona are clearly in the foreground for many reasons, there are also other medical issues which deserve our attention. One of these is the psychosocial situation of caregivers of disabled persons. A paper by (please insert authors) reporting on a study performed in collaboration between Isfahan and Hamburg Universities shows a high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms in the group of caregivers. The study indicates that this group requires more attention and support in order to cope with their psychosocial and practical demands.

Since internet-based interventions are gaining increasing importance in times of Corona, the Chinese experiences with a platform provided by Wuhan Mental Health Centre offering online crisis intervention is interesting. Even when the Corona pandemic was under control, the platform was still well received and used by the Wuhan population.

In sum, this edition of the *Journal* underlines the potential of an international perspective on issues of health and disease in psychosomatic medicine. What we might learn from the pandemic as a global threat is that our efforts to cope with the challenges need also to incorporate international learning from experiences in different cultures and improvement of collaboration.

References

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