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## The importance of psychohygiene in a care for nurses' mental health in the time of pandemic

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## Значення психогієни у впливі на психічне здоров'я медсестер у період пандемії

Вища школа охорони здоров'я та соціальної роботи  
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### Introduction

Current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole world and has significantly affected nurses' job performance. This is also related to the level of mental and physical strain associated with this profession, which has increased significantly compared to the period before the pandemic. A nurse constantly enters into relationships with other people, cooperates with other health professionals, encounters with death and dying, especially at this time, which is associated with increased mortality in patients affected by the pandemic. A nurse witnesses physical and mental suffering, which greatly affects their attitudes and personality. During a pandemic, heavy demands are placed on nurses, therefore it is wearing to manage this profession and not be subject to stress and exhaustion. The topic of nursing staff psychohygiene is still largely underestimated, and the absence of methods that would help to achieve some degree of mental well-being leads to negative consequences, which are reflected in the overall health of nurses and also in their performance.

The **aim of the paper** is to point out that during a pandemic, nurses are exposed to a number of negative factors that go beyond the normal practice of this profession, such as direct exposure to the disease, increased workload and work pace, work under pressure, dynamically changing situations, working in PPE, stressful situations, enormous increase in number of patients, colleagues tested positive for COVID-19, fear of transmitting the infection to one's family, etc. Imbalance between work and family, lack of rest, lack of support from management or the employer and from the family members, insufficient pay considering the work effort and work in high risk environment are also common problems. All these factors have a negative impact on the mental health of nurses, which is subsequently reflected in their professional performance. We investigated the level of nurses' psychohygiene during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Results

Based on the respondents' answers, we can state that the psychological well-being of nurses in the nursing practice during the COVID-19 pandemic is influenced by the following

factors: increased physical and mental strain, increased stress, exhaustion and overall negative impact on work. Factors that affect nurses' job satisfaction during a pandemic are in the form of rewards and financial evaluation. At the same time, working in a good team and in positive work environment, as well as sufficient rest, sufficient number of staff and protective equipment and the joy of patients' healing bring nurses a sense of job satisfaction. According to nurses, during a pandemic, increased workload and staff shortages are the most common causes of mental exhaustion, which is also associated with overall exhaustion and irritability. A significant number of respondents has experienced a loss of motivation, impaired sleep, headaches, feelings of anxiety and reduced concentration. Psychohygiene is essential in the work of nurses during a pandemic. Among nurses, the most known and used strategies to manage the mental strain are: sleep and rest, nature walks, positive work climate, physical activity and sports. The respondents also mentioned entertainment and relaxation, peer support and meditation as other ways of coping with psychological stress.

### Discussion

We conducted the survey in March 2022. The data collected provided us with an overview of how nurses perceive the impact of a pandemic on their work, how they cope with increased mental strain and stress, what techniques for coping with psychological stress are they familiar with and what is the level of their psychohygiene during a pandemic. The survey was designed for nurses who were actively working during the current COVID-19 pandemic, mostly in wards where they were in direct contact with patients infected with this highly infectious disease. 164 respondents took part in the survey, of which 87.5% were women and only 12.5% were men. Of these participants, 31.3% were aged 31-40 (26.6% aged 51-60, 21.9% aged 41-50 and 20.5% aged 21-30). In terms of education, the highest share was represented by nurses with a first-degree university education (28.1%), 25.0% with a higher vocational education and 25% with a second-degree university education. 15.6% of respondents had full secondary education with school leaving examination and only 6.3% mentioned another type of education. During the pandemic, respondents

experienced increased mental and physical load (31.3%), increased stress levels (28.1%), overall negative impact on their work (21.6%) or exhaustion (18.8%).

The profession of a nurse is demanding not only from the professional point of view, but also in the terms of physical condition, ethics, and mental resistance to stress. Nowadays, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, all these variables are multiplying. Nurses assess patients in protective clothing, wearing protective shields, gloves, respirators, which entail considerable personal discomfort and the contact with the patient is thus hindered. Despite all possible measures, many nurses became infected or died. These facts greatly increase nurses' stress level. That is why the care for mental health and well-being of nurses is very important. In our survey, as many as 68.8% of respondents state that the pandemic has had an impact on their mental health. The nurses found themselves in terrible situations, from the beginning of the pandemic, when they did not have enough protective equipment, working in an unfamiliar environment, when wards were being reorganized due to an increased number of patients, and they were also afraid of the impact of the disease on their families. Among the most common stressors and reasons for anxiety, nurses cite fear of infection, along with concern about the health of their family and friends, or lack of personal protective equipment. The very cause of stress is lack of self-care, which arises as a result of lack of time and breaks for food, or the inability to provide adequate care due to staff shortage. Facing death is extremely challenging by itself, but at the time of a pandemic it became very common, having negative impact on the mental health of nurses [16]. According to our survey, mental well-being of nurses during the pandemic is most affected by increased workload (55.9%) and staff shortages (49.7%), which they perceive as negative factors. Other negative factors as considered by the respondents are: the disease itself and the fear of the disease (37.2% of the respondents), increased mortality (29.4% of the respondents), social isolation (26.3% of the respondents). Many nurses feel mentally down due to their inability to help the patients as they would desire, they suffer from feelings of helplessness, other sources of stress and anxiety, including extremely long work shifts due to lack of colleagues combined with various restrictions and personal isolation. The workload during the pandemic also affects the family life of nurses, which adversely affects mental health in terms of family security and meeting the needs of the family, home education, care for the elderly and overall care for the family and household [10]. 34.0% of the respondents stated that awards and financial rewards contributed to their job satisfaction during the pandemic, and 19.7% of the respondents mentioned support from the management and colleagues as well as a good work environment as positive factors. 26.9% of the respondents stated that during the pandemic no factor brings them satisfaction in their work. In a quantitative study, via questionnaire survey, Yang et al. [17] addressed 200 randomly selected nurses working in hospital in the United States. Research has shown that employer support and peer support have had a positive effect on nurses' job satisfaction. Satisfaction with work was also affected by the financial evaluation according to work intensity. To the question concerning direct impact of the pandemic on the mental health

of nurses, 50.0% of the respondents agreed and 42.2% admitted that the pandemic has had an impact on the mental health of nurses. 62.5% of the respondents experienced increased physical stress during the pandemic. In fact, every situation during a pandemic brings stress, either in its positive form, when it stimulates higher performance, or in its negative form, when it lowers self-confidence, deprives energy and strength, leads to loss of motivation or to complete burnout [1]. 84.4% of our survey respondents perceived overall exhaustion as a manifestation of mental exhaustion and up to 46.9% also mentioned irritability. According to the respondents, another predominant manifestation of mental exhaustion was loss of motivation in 42.2% of the responses, 39.1% experienced disturbed sleep, 34.4% suffered from headaches, 25.0% experienced a decrease in concentration, and 21.9% felt anxious. 34.4% experienced headaches, 25.0% noticed decrease in concentration, 21.9% experienced anxiety. These conditions can affect nurses' mental health and can lead to development of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health disorders. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses could visit family and friends, exercise outside or in the gym, or be involved in social group activities such as athletic teams or extracurricular sport clubs. However, the social distance has limited skills normally used to deal with difficult, stressful, traumatic and emotionally exhausting situations. These traumatic events often have a delayed impact on an individual's mental health. Those traumatized by the COVID-19 pandemic may not be aware of the negative consequences they will face in the future. Mental health awareness is important because trauma often affects work performance. Individuals may experience irritability, sleep changes, and social or communicative withdrawal after traumatic events [11]. Multiple studies on COVID-19 – Maben, Bridges, [8]; Mo et al., 2020 [9]; Shahrour, Dardas, 2020 [12]; Sun et al., 2020 [13] claim that some nurses face intense psychological stress or trauma e.g. insomnia, fear, anxiety during the pandemic due to unsuitable working environment, lack of staff and personal protective equipment, heavy workload and lack of knowledge and skills related to infection control. In addition, several studies – Chen et al., [5]; Zhou et al., [18] stressed that the psychological problems that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affect occupational safety and efficiency, thereby increasing occupational risks. Even a rather capable individual who can easily deal with normal stressful situations, can sometimes get into a situation when the amount of stress experienced in particular moment is almost unmanageable. In such situations, it is important to know the methods of prevention and specific techniques for coping with stress. For as many as 70.3% of our respondents, the most common strategy for coping with mental stress is sleep and rest, 53.1% practice nature walking and 40.6% appreciate a positive working climate. A relatively large representation of 39.1% make use of physical activity and sports and communication with family and friends. Other ways of coping with mental strain are: support from the family in 28.1% of the respondents, entertainment and relaxation in 28.1%, support from colleagues in 26.6%, meditation in 20.3%, and music and art in 14.1% of the respondents. The general goal of

psychohygiene is mental balance, mental health and a healthy lifestyle for people of all ages. During the pandemic, it is appropriate to put in place suitable measures – strategies to reduce stress by offering consecutive rest days to ensure the safety of nurses [12]. In addition to self-safety, the study by Fernandez et al. [4] has shown that nurses are also concerned about their families; therefore, it is essential to provide them with the means to communicate with their families and to solve relevant issues. In addition, Chen et al, [5] suggested that support from friends and colleagues significantly helped nurses to cope with the onslaught of patients. In particular, supportive relationship with colleagues was crucial because they were more willing to share their experience with people who experienced the same, which could alleviate the psychological and emotional trauma. Adequate lifestyle helps maintain balance, supports resilience and performance of the whole body. Lifestyle is not only related to nutrition itself, but also to the regular alternation of sleep and rest with physical activity and exercise. Proper breathing is one of the basic components of psychohygiene. Many of us take breathing for granted, but we need to realize that without gas exchange, we could not exist. Sometimes we forget to appreciate things that we take for granted and so we feel dissatisfied. In ancient times, the ancient Indians, Chinese and Buddhas knew the importance and depth of breathing and recognized the need for proper conscious breathing [15]. Concentrated respiratory excursions and maintaining clear and calm thinking before entering patient's room can help nurses tolerate the stress and trauma they will face. Nurses who focus rather on work than on anxiety, stress and fear can provide better patient care with greater efficiency [11]. Yoga has the most complex system for breathing and breathing exercises called pranayama (prana – breath, ajam – break). Yoga, as a great example from the East, contributes to development of physical and mental health. It has a beneficial effect on the whole body, on relaxation and tranquillity, it helps to increase concentration. It is focused

mainly on achieving harmonization and concentration of individual body systems and body functions. Yoga creates mental calmness and body harmony. It is a so called physical and mental fitness training. During yoga practice, body acquires a unity of body, mind and emotions [7]. For the body to function well, regular sleeping regime plays a very important role. For example, if it is possible to go to bed and also get up at the same time. Try not to get into sleep debt, making sleep regime disrupted [6]. Rest is very important for the human body. It is essential to relax actively, correctly. The most important thing for one's body is to be able to listen to it and take care of it. Experts and various psychologists recommend for physically working people to relax passively and, conversely, for people with mentally demanding jobs to relax actively. Rest can thus be physical, emotional, mental, creative, social and spiritual. It is advisable to read, go out, voluntarily engage in various activities or to meditate [2].

The use of COVID-19 protective measures, avoidance strategies, social support, faith-based practices, psychological support, and management support, that nurses use as coping strategies, can reduce stress and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic [14].

### Conclusions

Our findings indicate that the use of effective coping strategies by nurses can reduce stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The onslaught of work during the pandemic and the pace of work and beyond demotivate nurses and do not bring job satisfaction. This fact is very important for the nurses to remain in the profession and to continue to perceive their work as a mission. A support from the state and competent persons in leading positions is therefore essential and they have to make sure that nurses are kept in the system by appropriate support tools.

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**The purpose:** we want to emphasize the importance of care for nurses' mental health and the need for more frequent application of the principles of psychohygiene, which are essential for their mental health, especially in times of pandemic. Our experience in practice points to the development of mental stress in nurses and confirm the absence of effective workload management strategies.

**Methods:** using a questionnaire of our own design we determined a level of psychohygiene of nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Results and discussion:** in this article, we point out how nurses perceive the impact of a pandemic on their work, how they cope with stress and what relaxation techniques they use.

According to nurses, during a pandemic, increased workload and staff shortages are the most common causes of mental exhaustion, which is also associated with overall exhaustion and irritability. A significant number of respondents has experienced a loss of motivation, impaired sleep, headaches, feelings of anxiety and reduced concentration. Psychohygiene is essential in the work of nurses during a pandemic. Among nurses, the most known and used strategies to manage the mental strain are: sleep and rest, nature walks, positive work climate, physical activity and sports. The respondents also mentioned entertainment and relaxation, peer support and meditation as other ways of coping with psychological stress.

**Conclusion:** the findings show that the use of effective psychohygiene strategies by nurses can reduce stress during the COVID-19 pandemic and prevent burnout.

**Key words:** COVID-19 pandemic, pandemic risk factors, the work of nurses, mental health of nurses, psychohygiene of nurses.

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**Мета:** ми хочемо підкреслити важливість турботи про психічне здоров'я медичних сестер та необхідність частішого застосування принципів психогієни, які є важливими для їх психічного здоров'я, особливо в період пандемії. Наш досвід практики вказує на розвиток психічного напруження у медичних сестер і підтверджує відсутність ефективних стратегій управління навантаженням.

**Методи:** використовуючи анкету власного дизайну, ми визначили рівень психогієни медичних сестер під час пандемії COVID-19.

**Результати та обговорення:** у цій статті ми вказуємо на те, як медсестри сприймають вплив пандемії на свою роботу, як вони справляються зі стресом і які методи релаксації використовують.

За словами медсестер, під час пандемії підвищене навантаження та нестача персоналу є найпоширенішими причинами психічного виснаження, яке також пов'язане із загальним виснаженням та дратівливістю. Значна кількість респондентів відчула втрату мотивації, порушення сну, головні болі, відчуття тривоги та зниження концентрації. Психогігієна має важливе значення в роботі медичних сестер під час пандемії. Серед медичних сестер найбільш відомі та використовувані стратегії боротьби з психічним навантаженням: сон і відпочинок, прогулянки на природі, позитивний робочий клімат, фізична активність і спорт. Як інші способи подолання психологічного стресу респонденти згадали розваги та розслаблення, підтримку оточення та медитацію.

**Висновок:** результати показують, що використання ефективних психогігієнічних стратегій медсестрами може зменшити стрес під час пандемії COVID-19 та запобігти вигоранню.

**Ключові слова:** пандемія COVID-19, фактори ризику пандемії, робота медичних сестер, психічне здоров'я медичних сестер, психогігієна медичних сестер.

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**Конфлікт інтересів:** відсутній.

**Conflicts of interest:** absent.

### Відомості про авторів

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