**PRESS RELEASE**

Psychological stress, anxiety, insomnia: A SISSA survey tells the pandemic from the point of view of health professionals

**Despite the psychological distress, only 4% of doctors and 3% of other health professions have benefited from the psychological support services made available. The research tries to understand the reasons, to do better in the future**

Immagine che contiene persona, nuotando

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A recently reported survey states that 67% of doctors and 61% of other health professionals fighting the COVID-19 crisis experienced psychological stress. The extreme difficulties encountered in their work induced feelings of hostility, frustration and helplessness, plus psychophysical symptoms such as depression, anxiety and insomnia, according to a survey carried out by SISSA researchers Elisabetta Pisanu (PhD student) and Ester Biecher (trainee) with the collaboration of Annalisa Di Benedetto and Maria Rita Infurna of ANVUR, and coordinated by Professor Raffaella Ida Rumiati of SISSA. However, the survey reveals that only 4% of doctors and 3% of other health workers requested and used the psychological support services provided to help them through the crisis. “These are striking figures” say the researchers “that should make us reflect on what can be done in the future to ensure greater participation by health professionals and greater protection of their psychological well-being”.

**The numbers of stress**

The data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire, which received 719 responses from health professionals and the mental health workers who provided their psychological counselling service. The research was conducted between 28 April and 31 May 2020. The results showed that 41% of nurses requested psychological support, as against 32% of doctors and 15% of hospital orderlies. Doctors and nurses stated that their main concerns were the fear of contracting the infection or passing it on to family members (39%), the lack of personal protective equipment (41%), patient numbers (51%), and the physical fatigue caused by the use of protective equipment (61%). Approximately one third of health workers reported experiencing feelings such as sadness, helplessness, anxiety or anger "often, very often or constantly".

**What failed to work**

"This survey tells us that the crisis has made a significant emotional impact on health workers. It should be recognised that the health authorities reacted promptly, despite enormous difficulties, to help this category by providing psychological support” explain Elisabetta Pisanu, the first author, and Raffaella Rumiati, the director of the research. “But these services met limited success, with take-up falling below 5%. The model of two or three distinct phases adopted for access to counselling was clearly not very functional. Our report highlights some of the many possible reasons. For instance, the survey revealed a degree of disorganisation and a lack of clarity regarding the services provided and how to use them". Furthermore, a communal rather than individual focus may have been seen as more effective: “Several health workers stated that they derived greatest comfort from knowing that colleagues were living the same experience. It was a situation of widespread unease, and the means of coping with it needed to be discussed with others”.

**"Health workers have suffered: Psychological aid can be provided differently"**

"This survey was made possible by the help of all the professionals who answered the questionnaire in a very difficult period, and our heartfelt thanks go to them" conclude the researchers. "It has enabled us to make good use of what we learned about the difficulties encountered by health workers during the first phase of the emergency, as related by health workers on one hand, and the psychologists and psychotherapists who talked with them on the other. Their testimonies, which have helped to reveal the limits and strengths of the welfare organisations and the measures adopted, mean that we can be ready to face future health emergencies with greater awareness and experience of the difficulties and psychophysical risks faced by health workers. While we hope that psychological help will not be needed in future, this research suggests that it can be useful and very important in easing the suffering of health workers, but should perhaps be offered in a different form for greater effectiveness and higher levels of participation".

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