



## Vulnerabilities of the older population during the coronavirus pandemic

In Brazil, the current coronavirus pandemic has accounted for more than 5.5 million infections and approximately 159,000 deaths from COVID-19, the syndrome caused by the virus. The psychosocial effects, however, are equally devastating, due to their impact on the financial security of families and the mental health of the population. Every possible scenario of the pandemic has effects that reveal the insecurity of the times we are living through, such as increased reports of anxiety and the fear of leaving home to work, the significant emotional burden imposed on frontline health workers in hospitals, or even families trying to deal with the pain caused by the death or hospitalization of their loved ones. The year 2020 surely represents a watershed event in recent human history.

The vulnerabilities to which we are exposed are particularly evident in the case of the older population, who are among the most susceptible to complications from COVID-19, with 50% to 84% of those killed by the disease in Brazil included in this group. Even before the pandemic, older people were one of the population groups that suffered most from isolation, due to the social vulnerabilities imposed by a society that excludes them from family and social life. Even in pre-pandemic times, these individuals suffer the burden of isolation when the process of institutionalization is accompanied by a decline in family ties, or even when they are excluded within their own homes. In addition, older adults are particularly vulnerable due to their progressive loss of social support, with the deaths of relatives, spouses and friends, which accumulate over the years, potentially impacting their mental health problems. The death of a spouse in particular is a factor that worsens the quality of life of older adults, accelerating the decline of their mental health and often being associated with their own subsequent death. Additionally, when compared to young people, older adults have a greater tendency to touch themselves, possibly to compensate for the lack of the touch of others. Now, in view of the context of distended quarantine, and even before the possible impacts generated by the emergence of COVID-19, older adults represent the group that suffers most from the distancing needed to control the pandemic.

Studies have shown that support networks and meaningful relationships are the greatest predictors of life satisfaction and longevity, overcoming other important elements such as healthy nutrition and living habits. The importance of forming and maintaining positive social networks is not surprising when we consider the overriding pro-social characteristics of our species, and the fact that subjective well-being is positively associated with the goals of building lasting familial and loving bonds. Furthermore it is known that hormones related to feelings of pleasure and well-being are released into the bloodstream when we are touched by other people, or when we interact with a dog, for example, and even when we believe that we

are in the company of another person in a non-family environment. Life's tribulations are minimized when we have someone to rely on. It is this social support that we need, particularly in the case of older adults, who are repeatedly excluded from family and social life in our society.

Although modern Western societies do not recognize the value of older adults to the extent they should, in other societies the older population assumes an important role in social dynamics, transmitting knowledge and contributing to the health of their grandchildren, for example. Through historical alliances, older people create and maintain networks of relationships that directly and indirectly affect the daily life of their families, contributing to significant moments throughout life.

It is worrying to consider that the distancing caused by the pandemic could further aggravate the vulnerability of the older population. Since the beginning of the year, I have advocated substituting the term *social distancing* for *physical distancing*, due to the fact that technology can serve as an instrument of approximation between physically distant people. Objectively, we do not want to socially isolate people, we want to keep them *physically* apart to preserve their health. Social isolation can have serious emotional consequences, such as feelings of loneliness, depression and anxiety. It is not by chance that older adults are among those who most report experiencing such feelings. Using technology to bring people together can minimize the negative impacts of a lack of physical and eye to eye contact.

Times of crisis such as this can only be overcome with changes in cultural practices and values. For example, this process of change cannot occur if we do not know how to respond to the spread of the virus at an individual and collective level. With this knowledge, we can reflect and plan the changes necessary to get through the crisis in the best possible way. Thinking as a society about the world we want after the pandemic is fundamental to mitigating the negative effects of the crisis, especially on the most vulnerable groups. Perhaps the pandemic will represent an opportunity to review our choices, and to plan decision-making at individual and governmental levels that can guide such changes.

I dedicate this text to my mother-in-law, Sandra Maria Duarte Marques, victim of COVID-19, who died at the age of 70. She will be greatly missed.

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