

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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LOVE RELATIONSHIPS

Ana Paula Relvas, Alda Portugal, Luciana Sotero

The world is facing the largest pandemic of the 21st century: COVID-19. In December 2019 there was the first case in Wuhan, China; on March 11, 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the pandemic; on March 18 the state of emergency was declared in Portugal, renewed twice (April 3 and 17). This data allows us to contextualise the problem, that is, the lockdown and the inevitable confrontation between the *I* and the *You* in a loving relationship.

Home confinement and social isolation became a reality with an impact at many levels on the lives of families and couples. Increased childcare, reduced contact with one's extended family and social networks, indoor family leisure and short/medium-term planning difficulties have translated into an increase in stress.

A study developed by CES* shows a statistically significant increase in stress, between pre- and post-social isolation periods, in people who are in a loving, cohabiting relationship. It is known that stress can exacerbate existing difficulties in the couple, such as the perception of lower marital satisfaction or increased conflict. The context brought about by the pandemic promotes the instability of the dyad, which (being already unstable by definition) closes itself off, as the habitual and healthy triangulations – with the rest of the family or with work and friends, for example – are drastically reduced. The problem is then the inevitability of systematic and continuous exposure of the *I* to the *You* (and vice versa), which maximises the individual components and makes the *We*, that is, the couple's collective, vulnerable.

Gender and power issues can be affected by the excessive physical proximity caused by isolation, associated with the traditional definition of roles, women's multitasking abilities and their role as carers. It is therefore not surprising that, of the participants in this study most concerned about the pandemic, 87.7 percent are women.

This study helps identify an alternative: the third party/ies and the quality of support between the *I* and the *You* in the relationship.

Although extremely concerned about the pandemic and reaching very high levels of stress, the participants showed that having someone to be concerned about in addition to the other (the *You*) in the same c space seems to be protective of the relationship, as it reduces the emotional disturbance (stress, depression and anxiety combined). In this case, this someone – the “third” party who helps stabilise the dyad – are the children, regardless of their age.

Companionship and the perception of the quality of the relationship are associated with a greater sense of control over the pandemic and greater individual well-being, but it is clear that the pandemic does not cut across all relationships, since the most vulnerable tend to be those most negatively affected by the lockdown.

* https://www.ces.uc.pt/ficheiros2/files/RELATORIO_Resultados%20Preliminares%20sobre%20Impacto%20Psicossocial%20da%20COVID-19%20em%20Portugal.pdf