

FAMILY RELATIONS IN CRISIS CAUSED BY COVID-19 VIRUS - A CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH STRONG FAMILIES

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Abstract

The students's self-perception of the coronavirus crisis indicates the importance of family adaptation to the new situation. Spending more time together than before opens up the opportunity for stronger bonding among family members, but at the same time opens the possibility of breaking relationships and deepening pre-existing tensions.

Keywords: family relationships, crisis situations, family empowerment, family togetherness

Introduction

Family is considered to be the most important socio-emotional environment in a one's life. The consequences of different family relationships remain throughout life, affecting self-realization and development of personality. Some aspects of preferably family functioning and strong families are: family togetherness, mutual

support, empathy and positive communication [2],[3],[4]. Unfortunately, not all families are strong, which is especially pronounced in some crisis situations or as a result of serious illness or death in the family. The current social moment of the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus is a serious crisis that requires a diversity of scientific approaches, and therefore, beyond the inevitable medical, undoubtedly assumes an appreciation of family functioning analysis, which is a useful basis for the development and implementation of various psychotherapy approaches. Respecting all the features of the indispensable individual therapeutic approach to each person, the authors set out a psycho-educational approach to family empowerment [1]. Applying a psycho-educational approach proves useful in situations of crisis that are associated with some people with health problems (alcoholism, eating disorders, cardiovascular problems, anxiety, etc.) and often causes it in times of natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, fires), as well as current epidemics and pandemics that have caused many people health and social problems, and difficulties in the expected functioning of the family and all its members. Self-realization and personality development in the emerging conditions of contemporary society in 2020 must be viewed in a different family and social context.

An analysis of the student discussion of family functioning during the current crisis

During the students's self-isolation and online studying, the authors conducted a forum discussion within the higher education courses *Family Relations* and *Family Pedagogy* about the perception of family functioning in a crisis situation caused by the COVID-19 virus. A total of 53 students of single and double undergraduate and graduate studies of Pedagogy (University of Rijeka, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences) participated the discussion. By answering the question *How do you perceive family functioning in the current crisis?* students offered their reflections and views about the most important aspects of family functioning that arose as a result of the crisis. We highlight some illustrative examples that relate to young people's thoughts about the topic, which clearly indicate the influence of different family and environmental factors on self-realization and personality development. A large number of students come from towns and villages away from their place of study, and they pointed out that the current situation has caused feelings of disturbed routine to them and their families - instead of spending time in college, they are currently at home with family. Students see this situation in two ways: as an opportunity to spend more quality time with family, but also as imposed companionship which impedes members' needs for spending time in some independent activities. In addition, the absence of study activities in our respondents is fueled by restlessness, discomfort, fear, a sense of uncertainty, social and academic isolation: *I found it strange at first to spend this time at home with my family because I was used to being in Rijeka and having a completely different routine. On the positive side, we can use this situation very well in getting to know our family better and building stronger relationships. However, spending too much time together can lead to strife, so it is important for each family member to spend some time dedicated to themselves, as much as possible in this situation.* Students go further in their reflections, pointing out that the situation is a risky ground for developing bad

relationships among family members because it is stressful and scary for everyone. *Because of this, we are forced to spend more time with family. For some families, this is a blessing because it gives them the opportunity to spend more time with their family and to get to know each other and get closer. While for others it can lead to strife, difficulty and problems that may have previously been ignored can come to light.* Besides, one should not forget the fact that many people continue to work and thus indirectly put their family members at risk, exposing them to the potential transmission of the virus. Students are aware of this and point out that *in the current situation with the corona virus, not everyone is in the same position, some parents have to work in places where they are exposed to the possibility of infection every day and return to their home where they constantly fear not infecting their loved ones. This period is not easy for anyone, especially for such families, but given that it is a sudden situation that we cannot fully control, the support of all family members and mutual care and assistance are important.* The students further state that the current situation shows the family's strength and togetherness, but also the different members's characters that we have not noticed so far, or that some traits triggered by the crisis have become more pronounced. Some members have more stable and less sensitive personality to threatening hazards, while others are more labile and susceptible to hysteria. *In my opinion, in every family there is a member or members who are always calmer and more relaxed and do not care so much, and thus try to comfort and calm those family members who may still be scared. It is imperative to understand that each person is unique and does not express emotions in the same way. Willingness to express emotions also varies from person to person. I find it bad to hide emotions within the family. We must allow ourselves and our parents to show their feelings, because with such parents, children will also allow themselves to show fear and other emotions in this situation.*

Family adaptation to the situation, according to students' perception, is facilitated by quality communication and emotional support. Students point out that in those families where the situation has resulted in a positive outcome, members help each other and provide emotional support. *Crises are time when family is most in need, children rely on parents to provide them with protection and emotional support, and spouses rely on each other. Successful communication, role organization and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully is what keeps families together and makes them strong in crisis situations.* As a recommendation for successful coping with the resulting situation, students cite fellowship, interaction among members, awareness and care for both physical and emotional health. *In times of stress and crisis, such as the current situation with the coronavirus, the family should stay together and work on empowerment. Every day there should be some activity that can be done together, such as watching a good movie, playing board games, discussing a book, etc. Daily consumption of news should be restricted, as it does not affect the mental wellbeing of the household in any way. as we are all bombarded these days with the news of death, thousands of newborns with the virus and the general chaos that is happening around the world. It's good to be informed, but not to overdo it. Family members need to encourage each other, talk about problems, and get out of the crisis even stronger.* It should be pointed out that a few students initially dropped out of the discussion forum because they were confronted with an issue that prompted them into their uneasy situation of sharing a dissenting opinion with other colleagues who they felt supported by their family despite some possible tensions of the newly created situation. The discomfort and sadness about the lack of family support two students shared through a personal e-mail and a direct telephone conversation with professor Zlokovic. Their families haven't provided support, understanding, and

empathy and because of these facts, they have not gone home at the time of the crisis but remained distant and hundreds of miles away in a dorm and rented apartment. They face the difficulties of loneliness, sadness, fear, uncertainty, the difficulty of getting groceries (remote commerce, lack of public transportation, reduced finances), even to a diagnosed depression and medication. After these students had talked with the professor, they joined the discussion forum, but mostly focused on their observations of the functioning of some other families.

Conclusion

Family as a socio-emotional environment proves to be the most important factor in the functioning and development of each person's personality. The current global problem of the COVID-19 virus pandemic is a crisis state that requires medical interventions as well as consideration of complex family functioning. In this paper, the authors presented an analysis of a students's forum discussion on the initial topic of *How do you perceive the functioning of families in the current crisis?* The answers indicate different family functioning, the importance of family togetherness, and the lack of family support, which in some cases leads to appearance of fear, insecurity, anxiety and decreased concentration for studying. In spite of the necessary caution in thinking about the long-term consequences on the various plans of the participants' functioning, the discussion forum does not seem unrealistic in the unwanted changes in the self-realization and personality development of all living participants of this global crisis.

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