

NATIONAL KAPODISTRIAN UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
1ST CLINIC OF PSYCHIATRY
Director: Professor Ch. Ch. PAPAGEORGIOU

HELLENIC REPUBLIC
MINISTRY OF CITIZEN PROTECTION
GENERAL SECRETARIAT FOR
ANTI-CRIME POLICY

**MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19 EPIDEMIC
IN PRISONERS' POPULATION**

The initial revision of the text concerning the general population was made by:

Angeliki BRAVOU, Katerina MADOUROU, Georgia VASILEIOU, Fragkiskos
GONIDAKIS.

**The revision for adjusting the initial text for the prisoners' population,
was implemented under the scientific supervision of the Directorship of the 1st Clinic
of Psychiatry of the School of Medicine of the NUOA (Professor Ch.Ch.**

PAPAGEORGIOU) by:

MASTELLOU E.S., ALATSA Ch., & VALEONTI N.

In accordance with the National Public Health Organization, the new coronavirus (**COVID-19**) causes respiratory infection, with varying severity in humans, from the absence of symptoms to the presence of some of them (e.g. fever, cough, difficulty in breathing, myalgias), which in some cases lead to severe pneumonia and even death.

The state, at risk of virus spreading and with sense of **responsibility**, implemented **extraordinary measures** to avoid and restrict the virus propagation, concerning social distancing and also recommendation for **observing personal hygiene measures**, compliance with medication taking, as well as the attending doctor's prompt information for any kind of symptom by all, while special care is recommended to the vulnerable groups (e.g. elderly or people with chronic diseases). As expected, these measures have inevitably affected the everyday life of all people who are called upon to **adapt** to the new

situation.

As you are in **detention conditions**, you are likely to face **further difficulties** than the general population, as you are already in a form of isolation (detention) and this makes it even more difficult to communicate with your loved ones. You may also have experienced **more intense mental stress, due to** the suspension of visiting hours, the possible adjournment of your trial or transfer, and the suspension of educational and therapeutic programs you attended or even due to your possible mandatory isolation (either if you have presented a symptom or if you are a newcomer or a transferee, due to the possibility to have been exposed to the virus). Moreover, social distancing and hygiene rules, while recommended, may not be so easy to implement (due to stay in cells or wards or due to aggravated health, as in the case of chronic diseases).

The current condition is a crisis situation in which we do not have complete control, which often breeds strong emotions. Therefore, it is considered useful to **try** to recognize your feelings, to think that they are normal and that others may experience them, to **accept** their existence, to try to **express** them and to **manage** them.

More specifically you may feel:

- **Anxiety.** It is a sense of fear to a threat, not necessarily visible, an unspecified terror for something imminent and unknown. So, you may be frightened, that you do not know things about this particular disease and its effects on your everyday life and that of your loved ones or the uncertainty about the future.
- **Feelings of guilt,** because you are in prison, while those people “outside” are fighting alone and this may make you feel unable to help them.
- **Sadness and loneliness,** because you are deprived of close contact (visiting hours) with your loved ones but also because many of your daily activities were abruptly interrupted.
- **Anger** for the restrictions imposed on you, considering them unfair.

- **Shame**, if you get sick or have been exposed to the virus. You may feel stigmatized by people who are afraid of being infected by you.

What you do or better yet what you can control:

- Take care of your **health** and **try** to keep your daily schedule. Proper hand washing, cleanliness of your cell or ward, healthy nutrition, adequate sleep, taking your prescribed medication, physical exercise, engaging in enjoyable activities and abstaining from substances reinforce not only your physical condition but your mental balance. In this way, **you protect yourself** but at the same time **you protect others as well**.
- Maintain your **social contacts** over the phone or in writing, keeping in touch with your family and important people in your life. So you can encourage them, listen to their concerns and they can listen to yours. In this way, **you are supported** and **you support them**.
- **Identify, understand** and **accept** your own emotions, as also the emotions of your loved ones.
- **Evaluate** the condition and **be informed** by the official authorities about the course of the pandemic, trying to limit misinformation and catastrophic thinking.
- Recognize everyone's **contribution**, but also your **individual responsibility** in the situation. Therefore, it is important to monitor your health on a daily basis and if you experience symptoms (e.g. cough, fever, severe shortness of breath), **consult** the correctional officers and the attending doctors.
- Continue **making plans for the future**.

What you can do when you feel mentally stressed?

- Realize **what you can really control** and what you can't. You can't, for example, control what will possibly happen with the virus, but you can control what you are involved in and focus on "**here and now**". You must not forget that "**and this will pass**", that it is an adventure, an experience in your life, which like the others has a beginning, a middle and an end. Through a difficult situation, you usually learn and come out stronger.
- Especially when you are under psychological stress, negative emotions reinforce negative thoughts and prevent positive ones. The moment you feel that way, **give space to your positive thoughts**, to those that make you feel good.
- **Give yourself time** to adapt to the new data, which will not apply forever.
- **Experts know**. So try to stay calm, trust them and follow the instructions and measures taken.
- **Avoid** overexposure to news and distractions by doing activities that make you feel relaxed and happy, such as listening to music, reading a book, writing your thoughts on a piece of paper, exercising or even handcrafting, since these occupations are feasible and permissible.
- In cases where anxiety does not subside, do not hesitate to ask for **help** by informing the correctional officer of your wing and requesting the wing clerk to contact a psychiatrist and psychologist (if available in the penitentiary) or a social worker.
- **Especially for detained parents:**

Being a detained parent is often a challenge, especially in times of crisis. Remember that having a healthy relationship with the child's caregiver is very important for the functioning of the whole family.

As a parent pursuing to maintain communication with your child, to the extent feasible, you have the potentiality to:

- **Explain** to the child, in a comprehensible way for his/her age, for which reasons he/she cannot see you, but also in general to support the child and the child to support you.
- **Remind** to the child that this is a temporary situation, an adventure in which it is useful to adapt and **inform** the child on the facts by refuting the rumors. Reassure the child in a realistic way, explaining to him/her that just like you, you will be safe following the instructions of the experts.
- **Share** your feelings and encourage your child to do the same, by showing him/her that e.g. the feeling of fear is normal and that everyone feels the same.
- **Emphasize** that it is more beneficial to focus on the positives of the situation, such as most free time, the positive outcomes of the disease, the opportunity to perceive the virtues of people who are distinguished through this situation such as individual responsibility, respect, the self-sacrifice, courage and confidence.
- If you are a **mother who has the child with you in the detention establishment**, in addition to providing **security** and responsibility for **physical care**, you have the opportunity to deal with and **participate directly** in the child's daily life. Pay attention to how you communicate with your child, play with him/her and engage him/her creatively and pleasantly.
- But don't forget to give yourself time. However, whether the child is with you (in the detention establishment) or not, be vigilant to perceive any disturbing behaviors of the child without hesitating **to consult a mental health specialist for children and adolescents.**

True translation from the attached Greek original document.

The translator: Mitropoulou Eleni

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