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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on physical health and mental well-being of university teaching staff: the case of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been disruptive in many ways. Different restrictions, recommendations and health measures, like lockdown, social isolation and physical distancing, impacted our work life, social life, and everyday life and habits, in particular self-care habits and practices in regards to fitness and physical activity, nutrition and mental well-being. Yet, healthy diet, physical activity and mental well-being are crucial overall health determinants.

In regards to work life in (higher) education sector, there were many shifts in the teaching and learning process, one of which was the most prominent – transition to remote teaching and learning which, amongst others, raised an issue of socio-emotional impact on teachers and students (Abdrasheva et al. 2022, Hughes 2020). Some of the most common symptoms of socio-emotional impact of new work conditions were decline in physical activity, increased food intake, rise in stress levels and increased burnout syndrome. In addition, due to the pandemic, the work-life balance has become blurred and adjustment to the new working conditions was time consuming, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, and thus it became more challenging to ensure time and space for physical activity and healthy diet.

There were also many challenges in regards to the social life of the university teaching staff. Social life is distinctly associated with person's physical and mental well-being. Poor social integration, social isolation and disconnectedness impact physical health and mental well-being (Cornwell and Waite 2009, Ge et al. 2017, Hämmig 2019). Thus, social isolation and physical distancing impacted not just the quality of teachers' work, but the quality of their life in general.

Theoretical framework

Two of the most common ways in which the pandemic impacted physical health and fitness was the disruption of fitness club routines (Deloitte 2022) and the decline of physical activity in general, especially high-intensity workout (Martínez-de-Quel et al. 2021). Most of the studies showed the decline in physical activity. In their research Ismail et al. (2020) state that during the pandemic over 38% of the research participants haven't been physically active in any way during the pandemic, 36% of them spent five or more hours in front of the screen for fun, while more than 60% had some kind of sleep disorder. The decline was confirmed by the Eurobarometer data from 2019 that show that 44% of EU citizens practiced some kind of physical activity, while in the year 2022 that number declined to 38%. For comparison, in 2019 in Croatia 27% of Croatian citizens were physically active, but in 2022 that number raised to 30% (European Commission 2022).

The pandemic also caused changes in nutrition and diet, i.e. eating habits. The increase in the intake of high-calorie food, the decrease in the intake of water, fruits, vegetables and low-calorie drinks, emotional and compulsive overeating (Poskute, Nzesi and Geliebter 2021, Coulthard et al. 2021) are some of the common causes of weight gain in 31 – 48% of the population (Di Renzo et al. 2020, Ismail et al. 2020). In 2019 52,7% of EU citizens had excess weight. In the same year in Croatia there were 65% of Croatian citizens with excess weight (an increase in comparison to the year 2014 when there were 57% and the year 2017 when there were 61% of citizens with excess weight) (Eurostat: Statistics explained 2019). Currently, none of the EU countries will meet the goal to stop the rise of obesity till the year 2025, presented in European Programme of Work 2020-2025, as around 50% of adults in the EU have excess weight or are obese (World Health Organization 2022d).

In addition to impacting physical health through physical activity and diet, the pandemic also caused the rise in mental health symptoms and mental disorders, such as stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disorder, burnout syndrome, substance abuse, self-harm and even suicide, especially during times of confinement and lockdown. (Eurostat: Statistics explained. 2022, Kumar and Nayar 2020, Maugeri et al. 2020, Pfefferbaum and North, 2020, World Health Organization 2022c). Besides previously reported stressors among university teaching staff that impact their work life, everyday life and health, like insufficient time, high (self-)expectations, slow career advancement, and poor work-life balance (Kinman 2001, Kinman and Jones 2014, Winefield and Jarett 2001), there were three most common factors of anxiety, stress and burnout in higher education (HE) teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

a) information overload concerning the COVID-19 pandemic,
b) additional heavy workload due to transition to distance or blended model of teaching, as well as the reshape of work conditions,
c) social isolation and physical distancing which impacted not only their work, but their personal life and lifestyle (Carr et al. 2022, Daumiller et al. 2021, Fernández-Suárez et al.

2021, Filho et al. 2021, Galea, Merchant and Lurie 2020, van der Ross, Olckers and Schapp 2022).

Information overload during COVID-19 pandemic is especially interesting factor since it was characterized as the second pandemic. For instance, the number of articles on the pandemic was growing exponentially every month which hindered person's ability to discern which information is true and important, and led to heuristic information processing (Hong and Kim 2020, Jagtap et al. 2021, Valika, Maurrasse and Reichter 2020, World Health Organization 2020). Beside that, information overload triggered different unpleasant emotions and adverse psychological effects, i.e. it was proven to be in positive relation to psychological distress and feelings of anxiety (Chen, Lin and Cheng 2022, Fadhilah et al. 2020, Isyawati Permata Ganggi 2020).

Research questions and Methodology

This study is based on the following research questions:

1. What were dietary habits, fitness (exercise) habits and habits for mental well-being of the faculty teaching staff prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-COVID.19 period? Which of the newly developed dietary habits, fitness (exercise) habits and habits for mental well-being (e.g. increasing or decreasing exercise, introducing healthy dietary habits or eating junk food, cultivating mental well-being more or neglecting mental well-being) did the faculty teaching staff keep in the post-COVID-19 period?
2. What was the impact of social isolation and physical distancing on the physical and mental well-being of the faculty teaching staff?
3. What was the impact of the information overload concerning the COVID-19 pandemic on the physical and mental well-being of the faculty teaching staff?
4. Did the faculty teaching staff experience the burnout syndrome due to work overload during the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to remote teaching, and was the impact of healthy dietary habits, regular exercise and cultivation of mental well-being on dealing with the burnout syndrome?

For the purpose of this research an online survey will be used. The survey will be created using Lime Survey and it will be pretested. Self-administered questionnaires will be delivered online through e-mail and LMS (Moodle, Loomen, etc.). Questionnaire will include both closed-ended and open-ended questions, and questions will be divided in 6 main themes.

The questionnaire will be designed to be answered by the teaching staff at Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, including all ranks and titles (167 persons in total).

Pre-COVID-19 period includes time till the end of 2019, COVID-19 period includes years 2020 and 2021, and post-COVID-19 period includes period from January till the end of September 2022.

This research is the part of the university scientific-research project on the topic of information and health literacy in the field of physical health and mental well-being, and health and wellness habits of the faculty teachers and students.

Expected Results

The research will identify main factors impacting physical health and mental well-being of the fteaching staff at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, as well as their habits and practices in regards to physical activity, nutrition and mental well-being before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, it is expected that due to new work conditions, social isolation and closure of fitness clubs during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a decline in the physical activity and mental well-being of the teaching staff, as well as the greater risk of poor nutrition, in comparison to the pre-COVID-19 period. It is expected that by the end of the COVID-19 period, due to adjustments to the new work and life conditions, there were certain positive shifts in the physical activity and nutrition, an possible integration of habits and practices that increased mental well-being. In regards to post-COVID-19 period, it is expected that the faculty teaching staff gradually dismissed the bad habits developed during the pandemic, but also kept (and further improved) the good habits concerning physical activity, nutrition and mental well-being. Finally, it is expected that factors of social isolation and information overload had negative impact on physical health and mental well-being of the faculty teaching staff, but also that physical activity, proper nutrition and cultivating mental well-being had positive impact on the burnout syndrome.

The expected results will help develop strategic approach to better supporting physical and mental well-being of the faculty teaching staff, and placing basic prevention and regulation strategies in regards to physical and mental health risks, both at individual and institutional level.

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