Compassion, social connectedness and trauma resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic: A multi-national study

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Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is pervasively impacting on psychological and social wellbeing, affecting mental health of the whole population across the world (Bavel et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020). In fact, the WHO has issued advice on the importance of protecting mental wellbeing during this pandemic. There are reports about increased stress, anxiety and isolation for the entire population, but especially for health professionals and vulnerable groups (Brooks et al., 2020; Pappa et al, 2020).

Mounting evidence has documented the benefits of compassion (towards oneself and others) for psychological health, emotion regulation, prosocial behaviour, and coping with adversity; and for physiological health, including the immune and cardiovascular systems, neuroendocrine responses to stress, and neurophysiological pathways (Gilbert, 2019).

Aligned with international research priorities in mental health science for the COVID-19 pandemic (Holmes et al., 2020; Galea, 2020), and with the WHO guidelines for the protection of mental wellbeing during and after this pandemic, this project established an international consortium with researchers from 25 countries around the world to explore the buffering effect of compassion against the damaging impact of the pandemic on psychological and social wellbeing, across time, and in different target groups and cultures.

Aims

The main aims of this project are to:

- Investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on compassion, coping mechanisms, feelings of social safeness, isolation/loneliness, traumatic stress and psychopathological symptoms, in 23 different countries/cultures;
- Explore changes across time (from the peak of the pandemic through to its end) on these psychological adjustment variables in the different countries;
- Test the moderator effects of compassion (for self/others and from others) and fears of compassion (for self/others and from others) on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on coping, feelings of social safeness, isolation/loneliness, traumatic stress and psychopathological symptoms, and post-traumatic growth;
- Explore cross-cultural differences on the impact of the pandemic on traumatic stress, psychological adjustment, the buffering effect of compassion, and posttraumatic growth following the pandemic.
- Explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological adjustment of health professionals and the role of compassion as a protective factor;
- Explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological adjustment of corporate/institutional leaders and the role of compassion as a protective factor.

More information about this project can be found @ https://www.fpce.uc.pt/covid19study/.

Methods

Procedure & Participants

This study is being conducted in a sample of general population participants (age between 18 – 80 y.o.), recruited in 23 different countries (Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Cyprus, United Kingdom, Denmark, Slovakia, Poland, Unites States of America, Canada, Australia, Japan, China, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, Mexico, Brazil), using a longitudinal correlational design. (Aimed N per country = 400).

The study is conducted online, using snowball (convenience) sampling. Participants will be assessed at baseline_ T1: Peak of the COVID-19 pandemic; T2: 3 months after T1; T3: 6 months after T1 (or later when the pandemic is over).

Measures

At these assessment moments, Participants complete a set of self-report measures assessing COVID-19 related psychological aspects, compassion, coping, social safeness, loneliness/isolation, traumatic symptoms, psychopathological symptoms, posttraumatic growth.

Self-report instruments
Compassion Attributes and Actions Scales (Gilbert et al., 2015)
Fears of Compassion Scale (Gilbert et al., 2011)
Impact of Event Scale – Revised (Weiss & Marmar, 1997)
Social Safeness and Pleasure Scale (Gilbert et al., 2008)
UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russel et al, 1980)
Brief - COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997; Eisenberg et al., 2012)
Post-traumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 1996)
Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1994)
The Perceived Coronavirus Risk scale (Kanovský & Halamová, 2020 adapted from Napper, Fisher, & Reynolds, 2012)
The Confidence in Coronavirus Safeguards scale (Kanovský & Halamová, 2020)

Conclusion

Findings from this multinational study will contribute to advance the scientific knowledge of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental wellbeing across time and countries/cultures, from Europe, North and South America, Middle East to Asia. Results from this project will advance the understanding of the protective role of compassion against the detrimental effects of this unprecedented pandemic on mental health and social isolation.

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