



Psycho-traumatology and Covid-19

A short interview with Professor Jana D. Javakhishvili, director of the Institute of Addiction Studies, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia, and past president of the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ESTSS).

Your presidency of the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ESTSS) coincided with the start of the global pandemic. By March 2020 ESTSS had organised a 'responding to Covid-19 task force' under your leadership and produced a package of recommendations on mental health and psychosocial care during pandemics. What motivated this early intervention?

Yes, we were very fast in responding to the Covid-19 related crisis. Probably because we felt that this was a major disaster and ESTSS is very active in responding to disasters, so to some extent this is our specialty.

Is there anything in particular that should be done differently in mental health care during the global pandemic, from the perspective of psycho-traumatology?

Definitely, there are a number of things that should be paid special attention to. First of all, not only should mental health care infrastructure and mode of mental health service delivery be adjusted to the new reality created due to the pandemic, but also the whole policy of managing the pandemic should be trauma and stress informed. If this would be so, last spring at the beginning of the Covid-19 global crisis, we would avoid such mistakes as the motto 'social isolation'. Much more attention would have been paid to the adjustment difficulties of our populations.

As an example, we've measured mental health symptoms among the Georgian population in August of 2020 and found out that more than 40% of the study sample met criteria for adjustment disorder. Much more attention would be paid to the most vulnerable groups, for example survivors of traumatic experiences such as forced migrants, for whom the complicated system of stressors might trigger negative thoughts and emotions related to their own traumatic background. Much more attention would be paid to the quarantine and curfew related mental health problems and preventive policies. Other important vulnerable groups are those that are on the margins of our societies - i.e. communities living in poverty, unemployed people, drug addicts, the prison population and those who are discriminated against due to this or that quality. I think it is not incidental that, the 'Black lives matter' campaign took the motto 'I cannot breathe' which fully coincides with a key Covid-19 symptom.

And now, at this later stage of the pandemic, what is now the most relevant thing to pay attention to?

With a crisis, we usually mean something which has a beginning, culmination and an end. After it has ended, we are working on mourning our losses - to achieve closure and start a new stage of our lives, with a sadder but wiser worldview. But in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, in spite of the fact that the vaccination is on its way, at the given moment we can neither predict nor foresee the end of the crisis. Let's hope that it is somewhere close to us, but we also need to accept the current reality as it is - life has changed and we need to unlearn many things which we were learning during the last decades, and learn new things which will help us to adjust to the changed circumstances.

At the moment the most important thing, both personally and professionally, is to work on supporting our resilience. The world population revealed huge resilience since the beginning of the pandemic, we've achieved a lot in the last months: changed our lifestyle (spending more time at home/indoors), working mode (moved to the virtual/online format), socialising - we even manage to attend virtual pubs and parties, etc. We need to go on and work further on mastering our resilience. And let us remember that resilience is not just an individual quality, it is a quality characterising us, our social surroundings, and interactions between us and our social surroundings. So this is our shared responsibility to help each other, in both personal and professional contexts.

Another important thing now is to keep exploring the situation, to be informed by evidence and respond accordingly. Since August last year, ESTSS has been undertaking a multilateral prospective study with the participation of the 10 ESTSS member countries. We are exploring the dynamic of the pandemic's impact on the mental health of our populations. We plan a very interesting conference on 17 - 18 June, 'Trauma and Mental Health During the Global Pandemic', and hope that colleagues around Europe and the world will join us and participate. This kind of professional gathering, sharing and exchange is a powerful mechanism of our resilience. [Find out more about the ESTSS conference.](#)
