



### **And what about our meaningful activities and mental well-being? Alarming results from adults regarding their meaningful activities, resilience and mental health in times of Covid-19.**

The global spread of the corona virus has drastically affected people's daily lives. The lockdown and consequently physical isolation were necessary preventive actions imposed by the government to avert the threat of the health crisis. These actions resulted in an unintended disruption of daily activities in terms of loss or forced adaptation of activities, which had an impact on people's well-being. Significant losses in well-being and mental health in the general population have already been largely reported in several countries such as China, where the pandemic started<sup>1-3</sup> and European countries such as England, Italy and many more<sup>4-7</sup>. However, until now, the effect of the preventive actions on everyone's activities was underexposed. The fact that people were no longer allowed to do what they were used to do or wanted to do, resulted in a disruption of their normal life.

An online survey conducted by the Occupational Therapy Department of Ghent University in Belgium, shows that the corona crisis impacts drastically the meaningfulness of people's activities, their resilience and mental well-being.

An analysis of a sample of 1785 Belgian adults revealed that during the corona crisis, people had difficulties to find meaning in their activities, showed poor levels of resilience and experienced a low mental health, compared to threshold scores in normal situations<sup>8,9</sup>. The main reason why the respondents were not satisfied with their activities was that the context making the activity meaningful was missing. Alarmingly, 40% of the respondents indicated that they didn't feel connected to the outside world anymore. However, 22% of the respondents were satisfied because they developed new activities and these even enriched their life during corona.

A variety of adaptation strategies was described, such as temporal adaptation (ex. spending more time in parenting since children were not allowed to go to school), spatial adaptation (ex. working at home instead of at the office) and finally occupational adaptation (ex. the so-called 'skyperitif') or a combination of the three. Some activities were no longer performed (such as volunteering, student jobs and social activities) while others were increasingly performed (activities taking place at home such as household, doing chores but also individual sports) resulting in a change in activity repertoire.

It could be concluded that some people showed a lot of creativity in adapting their activities. The respondents tried to find other ways to carry out their meaningful activities. Social activities were performed differently, taking into account the mandatory physical distance. People learned themselves new pieces of music by performing a concert in their neighbourhood every evening.

### **What about persons with chronic conditions?**

When looking at specific subgroups, persons with chronic conditions does not differ that much from the usual resilience and mental health scores they have in daily life<sup>10</sup>. Chronical ill persons have also low resilience and mental health but are relatively less affected than other subgroups during corona.

### **What about the students?**

Students turned out to be affected the worst by the preventive measures. Students felt significantly worse about the way they had to spend their days compared to the working adults and experienced their days and activities less meaningful. Both the general mental health and the resilience of the student group were significantly lower. Alarmingly, 84% of the students indicated that they were engaged in activities that did not fulfil their social roles nor strengthen their identity. It is also worrying that they took less care of themselves (dressing up, shaving, washing,...). On the other hand, students were more engaged in individual sports activities during the lockdown.

### **What about adults who worked during corona?**

People who could continue their job during the corona crisis have been less affected by the measures. Working people showed a better mental health, were more resilient and experienced more meaning in their activities than people who didn't work at that time.

### **What about age?**

Based on age categories, people between 18 and 25 years experienced significantly a lower mental health and less meaning in their activities than all the other age groups. This group had also a significantly lower resilience than the 26-35 year group, the 36-45 year group and 46-55 year group. People aged between 26 and 35 years had a significantly lower mental health than people older than 65 years. It needs some attention that the 65+ were all community dwellers.

### **What about the living situation?**

How did people who lived in an apartment without a balcony or a house without a garden experience the corona crisis? People who lived in a studio during corona, had a significantly lower mental health than people who lived in a house with a garden. Students who lived in a student room, had also a significantly lower mental health than students who lived in a house with garden or apartment with a balcony.

### **Conclusion**

These findings are the consequence of a drastically imposed lockdown, a very invasive and negative event, leading to a disruption of daily activities. People ended up in a totally new world. People need to be persons in the context of their family, their friends, their work and independent life. While human beings need social contact, feeling at home, knowing that they belong to a bigger picture and knowing their place and role in that picture, during lockdown they lost their sense of belonging.

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) recognises the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis in how people engage in their daily meaningful activities as a result of disruptive changes in community access, resource availability and individual health and well-being<sup>11-12</sup>. They recommend people to adjust and make compensations to their daily live routines in order to participate in ongoing or newly acquired occupations. So it might be the case that this new way of living will turn into the 'new normal' and that – once people all are adapted to this – they will regain meaningfulness in activities and by being engaged in a modified way they might regain good mental health and strong resilience. However, there is a possible risk when the preventive measures remain for a long time, people might experience a feeling of prolonged restrictions leading to occupational deprivation.

Authorities should be aware of the importance of maintaining meaningful activities in times of crisis and should take this also into account in future actions in the event of a crisis.

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