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## Working during pandemics: the need for mental health efforts to prevent the outbreak of mental disorders at the workplace

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has imposed an imperative need for immediate changes in many economic, educational, religious, cultural, and other practices of daily life. This outbreak has specific potential to heighten stressful conditions at work because of economic instability and uncertainty, the need to reconcile old and new demands, and the aforementioned changes in the workplace. According to Hamouche,<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 has the potential to expose workers to stressful conditions such as infobesity (information overload), financial loss, job insecurity, the negative effects of social distancing, and potential stigma directed to those associated with the disease because of their ethnicity or occupation (e.g., health professionals). As pointed out by Burdorf et al.,<sup>2</sup> the COVID-19 pandemic poses an enormous occupational health challenge, since the risk of becoming contaminated is a reality for several jobs which involve working in close proximity with colleagues and/or the general population, as well as, in some occupations, regular exposure to the disease. This very real scenario of risk introduces a new stressor – namely, the fear of contagion among employees. Furthermore, even those jobs amenable to working from home pose the challenge of having to adapt one's routine, leading to additional work-related stress.

The pandemic is affecting the mental health of the general population, and this impact is expected to be greater in some individuals (e.g., specific age groups, people with underlying diseases which place them in the high-risk group, people with preexisting mental health disorders) than in others.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, occupational demands may cause additional distress by preventing workers from following social distancing recommendations, placing them at permanent risk of contagion. Such workers must remain constantly vigilant of preventive measures, which increases their risk of psychological overload and distress. Health professionals are particularly susceptible to this, since they are exposed to a high risk of contagion through contact with patients and are

tasked with caring for people suffering from both the physical and mental effects of COVID-19.

Occupational exposure to psychosocial stressors can compromise workers' mental health. Mental disorders were the third leading reason for granting disability benefits in Brazil in 2008-2011.<sup>4</sup> Mental and behavioral disorders are among the main causes of lost work days. Such conditions are frequent and commonly disabling, often leading to absenteeism and reduced productivity.<sup>5</sup> A joint publication by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>6</sup> drew attention to the relevance of the relationship between psychosocial factors at work and the impact on workers' health. Chronic exposure to psychosocial stressors at work is associated with psychosomatic complaints, psychiatric symptoms, and changes in well-being.

As noted by Hamouche,<sup>1</sup> organizations and institutions must adopt strategies both during the pandemic (e.g., health monitoring and promotion of occupational safety) and after it is over (e.g., preventing stigma, providing social support, offering specific training). In this scenario, efforts in mental health are essential to preventing a new outbreak related to occupational stress: the outbreak of mental disorders.

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## Disclosure

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