

**LEISURE AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC: SOME LESSONS LEARNED**

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ABSTRACT: This article aimed to analyze the influence of leisure on people's mental health in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and to identify the lessons learned during this process, based on the perceptions of residents of the Belém Metropolitan Region. Methodologically, a bibliographic survey and application of online questionnaires were carried out with the population of the RMB, via the Google Forms platform, with open and closed questions. Based on the data collected, there was a certain agreement among the research participants about the effects that the pandemic and the imposed restrictions caused on people's mental health. In view of this, the pandemic provided some learning for the participants, among which it was learned that: more than a superfluous activity, leisure is a need that can be essential for the maintenance of human psychosocial health. In addition, leisure in interactions and social activities can contribute to mitigating and/or minimizing stress, anxiety and other psychological issues, especially in contexts of health insecurity, such as the pandemic triggered by the new Coronavirus.

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KEYWORDS: Leisure. Pandemic. COVID-19. Mental health. Emotional.

**LAZER E SAÚDE MENTAL NO CONTEXTO DA PANDEMIA DA COVID-19:
ALGUMAS LIÇÕES APRENDIDAS**

RESUMO: O presente artigo objetivou analisar a influência do lazer na saúde mental das pessoas no contexto da pandemia da Covid-19 e identificar as lições aprendidas durante esse processo, mediante as percepções dos moradores da Região Metropolitana de Belém (RMB). Metodologicamente, realizou-se pesquisa bibliográfica e aplicação de questionários on-line com a população da RMB, via plataforma Google forms, com perguntas abertas e fechadas. Com base nos dados coletados, se verificou certa concordância entre os participantes da pesquisa acerca dos efeitos que a pandemia e as restrições impostas causaram à saúde mental das pessoas. Diante disso, a pandemia trouxe alguns aprendizados aos participantes, entre os quais aprendeu-se que: mais do que uma atividade supérflua, o lazer é uma necessidade que pode ser elementar para a manutenção da saúde psicossocial humana. Ademais, o lazer nas interações e sociabilidades pode contribuir para amenizar e/ou minimizar o estresse, a ansiedade e outras questões psicológicas, especialmente em contextos de insegurança sanitária, como a pandemia desencadeada pelo Novo Coronavírus.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Lazer. Pandemia. COVID-19. Saúde mental. Emocional.

Introduction

Leisure is a social practice that, since the mid-Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, has acquired recognized importance in light of workers' struggles for free time (Dias, 2022). Studies on leisure show, according to Gomes (2014), that there is a human need for leisure, which varies according to different societies, social times/spaces, and economic, social, environmental, political, and cultural contexts. However, when considering the influence of the environment on human behavior, the contemporary social environment is marked by a certain instability which, according to Teixeira and Silva (2012), may contribute to the onset of stress and anxiety in the face of uncertainties arising from certain everyday situations, thus affecting quality of life.

In the past century, many scholars understood that leisure should not be considered from functionalist perspectives, such as compensatory and utilitarian ones

(Marcellino, 1987), especially within the framework of capitalism and social control. However, from another perspective, more recent investigations indicate that the functionality of leisure needs to be relativized in some cases (Gomes, 2020), since its practice has been considered by several specialists as contributing to people's well-being and quality of life (Pondé; Caroso, 2003) — indeed, fields such as Tourism, Education, Physical Education, Physiotherapy, and Occupational Therapy have pointed to a range of practical applications that identify leisure as a potential means of maintaining human physical and psychosocial health.

As is widely known, the Covid-19 pandemic brought about daily changes across the planet, affecting people's mental health during and after that period (Kim *et al.*, 2022). In this process, on the one hand, it was observed that, in addition to concerns about the virus, the restrictions on leisure activities imposed by health measures also negatively impacted people's health (Menezes, 2021). This atypical scenario, in turn, further revealed the importance of leisure, as its essential role in individuals' physical and psychological well-being became evident. Leisure, often underestimated in “normal” times, has emerged as a fundamental element for maintaining emotional balance and relieving stress during the New Coronavirus health crisis (Abdel Hadi; Bakker; Häusser, 2021).

In this regard, several investigations, both national and international, have been conducted since 2020 to analyze various aspects related to leisure during the Covid-19 pandemic. On a global scale, studies have investigated several dimensions, including the assessment of restrictions imposed by the coronavirus on leisure (Stodolska, 2021), the role played by leisure in the context of isolation (Liu *et al.*, 2022), and the perception that leisure helped mitigate anxiety and stress during the pandemic (Abdel

Hadi; Bakker; Häusser, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, research has also focused on the different forms of leisure that emerged as a result of the new dynamics imposed by the pandemic (Alonso Ruiz *et al.*, 2022), as well as on the complex relationship between work and leisure during this period—when the home, previously a refuge from work, was forcibly transformed into a site of professional routine (Abdel Hadi; Bakker; Häusser, 2021; Klaver; Lambrechts, 2021).

In Brazil, several studies have focused on the complexities of leisure in times of pandemic. Notable works include that of Versiani (2020), which explores the challenges and perspectives of leisure in the face of Covid-19; Tavares *et al.* (2020), which addresses physical inactivity during leisure in the pandemic context; Clemente and Stoppa's (2020) analysis of domestic leisure possibilities; Menezes's (2021) reflections on mental health issues related to leisure restrictions; the discussions of Silva *et al.* (2021) discussions on the impact of social isolation on leisure in peripheral communities; Neca and Rechia's (2020) questioning of the choice between staying at home or occupying outdoor public leisure spaces; and Cheibub and Freitas's (2020) study on leisure (im)mobilities across social classes in Brazil.

In the state of Pará, and more specifically in Belém, in the northern region of Brazil, however, few studies were found addressing the relationship between leisure and mental health during the pandemic, with limited discussion regarding the effects of Covid-19 on the health of the city's population. The scenario described above demonstrates the importance of the theme of leisure, which continues to permeate various fields, including Tourism. The prevalence of studies—especially in the southeastern region—developed during the global pandemic context underscores the relevance of formulating the following research question for this study: What is the

influence of leisure on people's mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic, as perceived by residents of the Metropolitan Region of Belém (RMB)?

Thus, this study aimed to analyze the influence of leisure on people's mental health in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, based on the perceptions of residents of the Metropolitan Region of Belém (RMB), as well as to identify the lessons learned during this process, considering the period of confinement, restrictions on leisure practices, and other activities affected by isolation.

Methodology

Methodologically, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. The qualitative approach was adopted because it allows for "[...] the collection, observation, and analysis of text (spoken and written), and direct observation of behavior" (Oliveira; Strassburg; Piffer, 2017, p. 92), while the quantitative approach "[...] relies on mathematical language to describe the causes of a phenomenon, the relationships among variables, etc.". From a procedural standpoint, bibliographic research was conducted based on articles, theses, dissertations, and other sources, in order to "[...] present the theoretical foundation or literature review developed through the investigation of previously published scientific works, allowing the researcher to acquire theoretical knowledge" (Souza; Oliveira; Alves, 2021, p. 68).

Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire between October and November 2023, with the participation of 60 residents of the Metropolitan Region of Belém. It is noteworthy that the sample of participants profiled a majority, 45 female people, aged between 18 and 35 years old, with 14 people being over 36 years old, with only one participant being over 65 years old. The diversity in the approach to the issues

and the representation in the age range contribute to the robustness and relevance of the data collected, offering a comprehensive view of the perspectives and experiences of RMB residents in relation to the subject studied.

The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions addressing the topic in question. Out of these, 11 were closed-ended, two were open-ended, and one involved a rating scale. The survey was conducted using Google Forms due to its practicality, since, as Mota (2019, p. 373) notes, “The author can send it to respondents via e-mail or through a link, allowing everyone to answer from anywhere”. Furthermore, there is another important advantage of Google forms, which is the organization of research results, since they are organized almost in real time as responses are received, “[...] in the form of graphs and spreadsheets, providing quantitative results in a more practical and organized way, facilitating data analysis” (Mota, 2019, p. 373).

Leisure and Mental Health

In the 1970s, based on the studies of sociologist Joffre Dumazedier, important theoretical contributions to the concept of leisure were developed. Among them, Dumazedier (1979) proposed the classification of five cultural contents of leisure, namely: (1) physical, (2) manual, (3) intellectual, (4) artistic, and (5) social. More recently, however, some authors as Gomes (2011, 2014, 2023) have pointed out certain limitations in the conception and categories of Dumazedier. Among the main issues debated, Gomes (2023) and Gomes, Debortoli and Silva (2019) point out that society has undergone several transformations since 1970 and, in effect, there is no way to universalize knowledge that was produced within the scope of such a specific and contextually marked reality, such as the European reality, of which Dumazedier was a

part. Since then, in addition to the aforementioned classifications, Camargo (1989) proposed the existence of tourist content and, later, Schwartz (2003) identified a more contemporary content, virtual content. Thus, although the contributions presented by Dumazedier are very important, it is worth highlighting that they do not account for all of today's societal complexities.

In this direction, Gomes (2023) and Gomes, Debortoli, and Silva (2019) argue that it is necessary to invest in a theoretical conception that seeks to diversify leisure experiences beyond the categories proposed by the French sociologist, in order to broaden the possibilities of the different existing cultural manifestations. As the author states:

Diversifying our leisure activities is essential, as it broadens the range of possibilities. It is also a necessary consideration for professionals working in the field of leisure, ensuring that planning does not cater to only one type of interest, since this would limit the participation of individuals who do not enjoy that particular activity (Gomes, Debortoli and Silva, 2019, p. 1).

Although there are concepts and definitions that, from the 1970s to the most recent studies, sometimes converge and sometimes diverge from each other, there is a consensus regarding the inherent and timeless nature of leisure in human life. Leisure is a social practice that, over time, has been redefined and molded to the parameters of contemporary society. In view of this, the theoretical framework guiding this research follows the orientation of Gomes (2014), who believes that leisure is both a human need and a human creation, and therefore must be understood within the dimension of culture. According to the author, leisure represents:

[...] the need to enjoy, playfully, the countless culturally constituted social practices. This need materializes through playfulness and can be fulfilled in multiple ways, according to the values and interests of individuals, groups, and institutions within each historical, social, and cultural context. Therefore, leisure must be treated as a social, political, cultural, and historically situated phenomenon (Gomes, 2014, p. 12).

From this perspective, “[...] leisure is a complex social practice that encompasses a multiplicity of playful cultural experiences, contextualized and historically situated” (Gomes, 2014, p. 16). Thus, the Field of Leisure Studies is characterized primarily by its interdisciplinarity, since theoretical contributions from various areas of knowledge are brought together in its debate. In this discussion, considering the numerous benefits that leisure can bring, some theorists in the health field have pointed to leisure as a fundamental element for an individual’s mental health, as well as identified harms arising from its absence. Leisure, therefore, provides an opportunity for the mind to rest, rejuvenate, and recharge its energies. This issue reveals that in Brazil, especially in the northern region, there has also been a perceived need to identify these issues concerning the influence of leisure on the health of people living in Belém.

It is worth noting that, in addition to leisure itself, the diversity of its practices offers a wide range of opportunities that generate different sensations and emotions. These practices range from physical activities, such as outdoor walks, to involvement in creative activities, such as painting or music. This multiplicity of options provides each individual with the possibility of tracing their own path toward the maintenance of mental health. In other words, whether through sports, immersion in cultural activities, or through parties and celebrations among friends and family, leisure, for some people, can reveal itself as a kind of “antidote” to the wear and tear of obligations and everyday problems that “poison” people’s emotions, following a functionalist perspective.

In this regard, Pondé and Caroso (2003, p. 167) point out that:

There is a growing consensus that leisure can be considered a protective factor against psychological symptoms, since it cushions the effects of stressors. These studies are based on the fundamental assumption that leisure is one of the four buffers of stress and that the other three (a sense of competence, a sense of purpose, and physical exercise) can also be achieved through leisure practices.

Given the above, and the growing awareness of the importance of mental health, it is imperative to foster the relationship between leisure and emotional well-being. More than that, it is essential that health professionals initiate a movement toward incorporating leisure into medical treatments. That is, integrating the discussion of leisure into consultations and prescriptions reinforces the understanding that mental health care is a holistic process encompassing various dimensions of life. In short, by recognizing the value of leisure in promoting human health, it becomes possible to foster the construction of a society that values not only hard work but also recognizes that leisure, as a space/time dedicated to oneself, is a vital necessity for human sanity, as stated by Gomes (2014, 2023).

The Pandemic and Its Implications for Leisure and Mental Health

The end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 were marked by the arrival of the novel coronavirus, which was considered a public health emergency with a high risk of spreading among different countries around the world. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) determined that Covid-19 was characterized as a pandemic (WHO, 2022). In Brazil, with the confirmation of the first case of the disease on February 26, 2020, in the city of São Paulo, shortly thereafter, Ordinance No. 454, dated March 20, 2020, declared a state of community transmission of the novel coronavirus in the country (Brazil, 2020a). With the establishment of this new reality, as pointed out by Menezes (2021), the world was compelled to reconfigure itself. Among the significant changes in daily life, quarantine, isolation, and social distancing were measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus.

The rapid dissemination of the virus around the world, the uncertainties about how to control the disease and its severity, as well as the unpredictability regarding the duration of the pandemic and its consequences, were identified as risk factors for the mental health of the global population (Brazil, 2020b). In addition, along with distancing measures, society altered its behavioral patterns in response to changes in the usual routines of socialization, work, and leisure. As a result, people began to fear for their own health and that of their families, as well as to face loss, stress, fear, and anxiety, which triggered emotional and psychological issues (Brazil, 2020c). Indeed, an event such as this can cause neurological disturbances at varying levels of intensity (WHO, 2022).

In this context, according to WHO data, it is worth highlighting that approximately 9.3% of the Brazilian population faces some type of anxiety disorder, including conditions such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), phobias, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress and panic attacks. During the pandemic, this situation was aggravated with a significant increase of 80% in the number of people with some type of mental disorder, as revealed by a survey conducted by the State University of Rio de Janeiro (Goiás, 2021). In this regard, the WHO classified the pandemic as a global crisis in terms of mental health, estimating a sharp increase of 25% in cases of anxiety and depression in 2020 alone, affecting different age groups (Rocha, 2022).

In the case of older adults, the study by Martins *et al.* (2021, p. 52) highlighted that during the pandemic, leisure for this group, “[...] which once contributed to the redefinitions of their daily lives, came to represent health risks — which should be avoided. Thus, since their leisure activities are restricted, the possibility remains of

reconfiguring isolation within the home space and among those who inhabit it”. As for children and young people, a report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Koulla Yiasouma, based on a survey conducted in the country for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), found that the Covid-19 pandemic and the imposed restrictions also had “a strong impact” on this group. According to the study, more than half (52%) of 16-year-olds who participated in the survey felt that their mental and emotional health had worsened during the pandemic.

Regarding mental health, according to Meredith (2021, n.p.), “The long-term impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and young people has significant potential, especially if appropriate support and intervention were not provided”. According to Clemente and Stoppa (2020, p. 462):

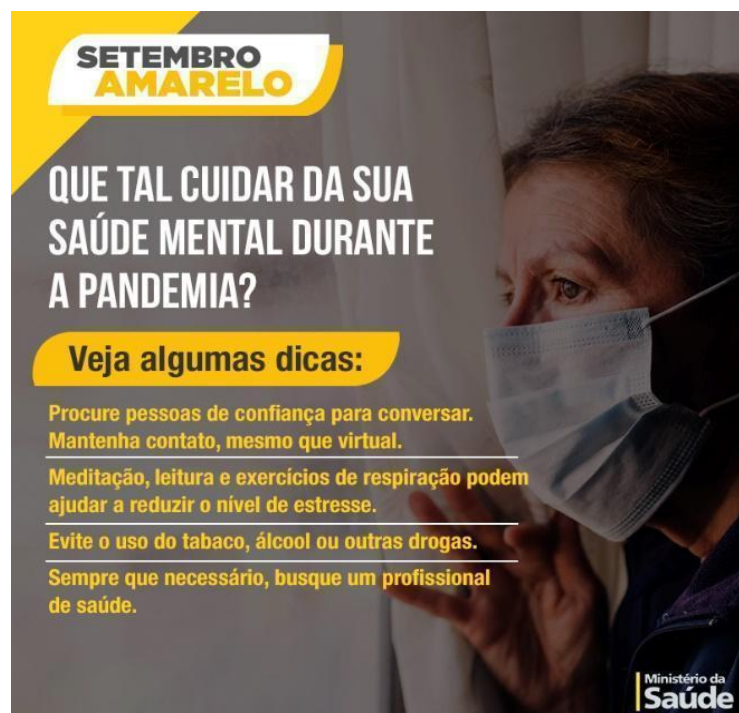
Social isolation transformed and adapted many leisure experiences, restricted people’s choices now limited to the domestic environment, and made some sociocultural barriers more evident, mainly related to economic issues, level of education, restricted access to leisure spaces and facilities, and the reorganization of leisure and work time and space.

Faced with an atypical reality, leisure experiences were redefined. People began to confine their leisure to the domestic environment, withdrawing from social interaction. Many began to consume virtual entertainment, such as streaming platforms, television, and social networks as alternatives (Gomes, 2023). This consumption of leisure through virtual means extended into the post-pandemic period, even with the resumption of social practices and the return of cultural events and concerts. Such a context also influenced various aspects of people’s lives — emotional, physical, and economic.

This situation generated concern among health agencies. These institutions then began to promote content with guidelines on how to take care of mental and

psychosocial well-being in different target audiences during the pandemic, as exemplified in Figure 1, shared by the Ministry of Health (MS) on its social network “Instagram”. These instructions were constantly disseminated through social media, television channels, radio, and other information platforms.

Figure 1: Yellow September Campaign 2020



[Legend: Yellow September - How about taking care of your mental health during the pandemic? Here are some tips: Seek trustworthy people to talk to. Stay in touch, even if only virtually. Meditation, reading, and breathing exercises can help reduce stress levels. Avoid using tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs. Whenever necessary, seek a healthcare professional. Ministry of Health].

Source: Twitter Social network published on July 10, 2020 (Brazil, 2020a)⁵

In this scenario, researchers in psychosocial care and mental health from the Center for Studies and Research in Health Emergencies and Disasters (CEPEDES), of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ), presented guidance and care strategies during the quarantine period, including: “Instituting moments of leisure and recreation, talking, exchanging information, books, and movies, can be good ways to maintain

⁵ Available at: <https://twitter.com/minsaude/status/1309232207660158978/photo/1>

contact with the residents of the same household in a healthier way, reducing tension and the possibility of conflicts” (Schmidt *et al.* 2020, p. 10). In this regard, private sector organizations also took a stance to minimize the effects of the pandemic on mental health, such as the preparation of booklets, campaigns, and tips on how to deal with these challenges, as was the case with the health insurance company “Unimed,” which, in 2021, created a booklet⁶ with recommendations available on its website, as well as disseminating research on the subject.

With the arrival of the pandemic, restrictions on leisure and social practices were in a scenario where the priority was to safeguard physical health and avoid contagion by the unknown, lethal, and highly contagious virus. The situation was an emergency, and one of the restrictive measures that was most coherent at that moment was confinement, and this action generated a negative response in people's emotions who, in addition to experiencing a reality of panic, uncertainty, and fear, also had to deal with the restrictions. This abrupt change in activities, previously practiced and exercised freely, and face-to-face interactions, in pairs or in groups, at work, at university, in public spaces, or even in the domestic environment with friends and family, gave way to virtual interactions, remote conversations, interactions via video calls, photos, audio messages, and phone calls. These forms of interaction, for a long time, were an alternative to maintaining relationships in the daily life of an atypical period. Although they alleviated the situation, these forms of interaction did not replace the need for physical contact, as Matos, Pinheiro, and Bahia (2020 apud Duarte, 2021) explain when they write:

The social interest of leisure, present in practically all experiences, but highlighted in the need to meet, see, live with the other, talk and/or celebrate,

⁶ https://www.unimed.coop.br/portalunimed/viver_bem/coronavirus/saude-mental_coronavirus.pdf.

perform affective exchanges is part of the human condition (...) From this perspective, online meeting activities did not replace this, which is the main content of Brazilian leisure, the social, but alleviated this lack and popularized online practices much more” (Duarte, 2021, p. 277).

This period of confinement revealed the importance of leisure for people's physical and mental health, and although technologies were of great use for many people in maintaining social relations, they do not meet the human need to socialize in person. This reality is perceived, and based on this, public and private campaigns and initiatives in many countries were promoted to help preserve mental health, recognizing the importance of creating new leisure alternatives amid the pandemic and not neglecting mental health and the role of leisure as a human need and as a social right.

Still, in the context of leisure as a social right, and specifically referring to the pandemic period, the dynamization of government-promoted actions to reduce the effects of restrictions was addressed in an isolated manner, according to the logistics of each State, but, in general, there was encouragement for leisure at home and the promotion of cultural events broadcast virtually.

In Belém, no significant actions were found that aimed to reduce these effects and considered leisure with the due importance it has for social and individual relationships. Indeed, many people may perceive leisure in a limited way and not as a human need, a social right, an important practice in the process of preserving mental health that should be a concern of governments, just like all constitutional rights. According to Bonalume (2002, p. 212),

Public leisure policies should be collectively constructed based on the interests and needs of the population, enabling access to creative and pleasurable activities that consider the identity and history of the groups inserted in a specific historical context, seeking a society with rooted cultural identity, interrelated, democratic and free. It is up to the public managers of each city to ask themselves whether their population has space for rest, amusement, and development through creative options in free time that encourage them to organize themselves and act collectively. In this way, we will have leisure in the available time based on an attitude of free and

voluntary participation in the sense of having no other interest besides the pursuit of pleasure.

In this context, it is up to the Government to democratize access to leisure and, due to an atypical scenario, to create a proposal that adapts to the limitations of the specific moment so that the population does not lose it as a social right and, above all, as a human need. Preventing people's mental illness is less complicated than dealing with a large demand of people who went through a pandemic and did not receive proper attention in coping with trauma, depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems.

Results and Discussion

Based on the data obtained, several lessons could be drawn about the relationship between leisure and mental health during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. In the analysis of the results, it was found that the pandemic increased the incidence of emotional problems in the population of the Metropolitan Region of Belém (RMB). From the sample of 60 participants, 63.3% (n=38) developed emotional problems of stress or anxiety during this period, and 36.7% (n=22) reported not having developed any (Table 1). Such prevalence of emotional problems development, such as stress and anxiety, during the pandemic, reflects a scenario permeated by fears and uncertainties, as well as highlighting the magnitude of the psychological impact generated by the pandemic.

Thus, as a **first lesson**, it can be stated that: *population was not psychologically prepared to face a major global crisis like Covid-19*. This is corroborated by the fact that only 28.3% (n=17) presented some mental disturbance before the pandemic and that 81.7% (n=49) of the participants knew at least one person in their social circle who

developed depression (Table 1), data that confirm the large number of people psychologically affected during the period.

Table 1: Development of mental disorders before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

Question	Answer	n	%
Did you experience any mental health problems before the pandemic?	Yes	43	71.7%
	No	17	28.3%
Did you develop psychological and/or emotional problems during the pandemic?	Yes	38	63.3%
	No	22	36.7%
Have you known anyone in your social circle who developed depression during the pandemic?	Yes	49	81.7%
	No	11	18.3%

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research (2023).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), these mental symptoms were perceived by a large part of the Brazilian population due to social isolation during the pandemic. Knapp (2004) points out that moments of anxiety, when experienced persistently, intensely, and disproportionately to reality, as was the case during the pandemic, can cause problems for the individual, generating significant suffering or impairing their social and occupational functioning due to the mental and physical symptoms that may manifest. Regarding stress, according to Teixeira and Silva (2012), it is associated with experiencing situations that are perceived as threatening to human well-being, encompassing both physical and psychological aspects. Thus, stress can be attributed to the accelerated pace of everyday life, the pressure to increase production in shorter periods, and other factors present in contemporary society, such as Covid-19.

In the pandemic scenario, the lockdown, a mandatory preventive measure that during the pandemic limited the population's movement, was a determinant in the increase of stress and anxiety levels, according to 75% (n=1) of the research participants (Table 2). Additionally, 98.3% (n=59) of the participants considered that the lack of

socialization and the quarantine restrictions were determinants for the development and/or worsening of stress, anxiety, and depression (Table 2).

Table 2: Restrictive measures and their relation to stress, anxiety, and depression.

Question	Answer	n	%
Was the lockdown a determining factor in increasing stress and anxiety levels?	Yes	45	75%
	No	15	25%
Did quarantine restrictions lead to the development and/or worsening of stress, anxiety and depression?	Yes	59	98.3%
	No	1	1.7%

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research (2023).

These percentages demonstrate that, despite the importance of biosecurity measures, it is necessary to reflect on the impacts they caused. After all, by isolating people in their homes, these measures also prevented physical contacts, exchanges, and daily sociocultural relationships among friends, neighbors, and relatives. According to Cardoso (2020, p. 253),

The coronavirus crisis and its need for quarantine, imposed this time by the biological laws of the degree and speed of virus contagion, offer us the opportunity to see how relative our human needs are. **Our life is not limited to food, housing, and health needs. We need each other, to live with family and friends, to attend formal or informal events parties, ceremonies, etc.** But to what extent and how we do all this can vary greatly (Emphasis added).

Therefore, it is understood that social distancing and isolation, caused by Covid-19, negatively influenced stress and anxiety levels. Therefore, as a **second lesson**, it is concluded that: *humans, as social and sociable beings, also need interaction, socialization, and sociability, sometimes facilitated in leisure spaces/times, to maintain their psychosocial health.*

According to França (2020), shared leisure experiences in urban public spaces are a striking element in contemporary society and are often linked to quality of life and social interaction. In public domains, the playful aspect, as a cultural construct,

undergoes reconfigurations and spreads through various forms of communication. It is in this public domain setting that human singularity reveals itself, achieving visibility. Thus, in these spaces, leisure practices build closeness, feelings of belonging and a sense of collectivity, as well as moments of sociability. However, in a pandemic scenario such as Covid-19, these face-to-face interactions were made impossible. And it seems that the desire to relive them during periods of social isolation and the inability to do so certainly contributed to processes of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Regarding leisure, 63.3% (n=38) of respondents managed to adapt their practices at home. On the other hand, 33.3% (n=20) were unable to make this adaptation at home and, therefore, missed out on leisure activities due to the restrictions. Only 3.4% (n=2) stated that the restrictions did not affect their leisure (Table 3). In this regard, socioeconomic factors must be considered, since the space and conditions of the home, as well as access to technologies, bring individuals closer to or distance them from certain types of leisure and entertainment, in addition to psychological, sociocultural, socio-environmental, and other factors related to quality of life⁷. That said, as a **third lesson**, it is concluded that: *the pandemic allowed participants to (re)discover or recognize leisure as a fundamental human need, and faced with its impossibility outdoors, they sought other possibilities within the home as a way to satisfy this need.*

Table 3: Adapting leisure practices at home during the Covid-19 pandemic

Question	Answer	n	%
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⁷ According to Duarte (2021), quality of life “[...] is related to the perception of well-being resulting from a set of individual and socio-environmental parameters, whether modifiable or not, that characterize the conditions in which human beings live. Among the social and environmental parameters are: housing, transportation, security, medical care, education, culture and environment; as individual parameters it considers: heredity, lifestyle (eating habits, stress control, habitual physical activity, preventive behavior, relationships) (Duarte, 2021, p. 16).

Have you managed to adapt your leisure activities at home?	Managed to adapt	38	63.3%
	It was not possible to adapt	20	33.3%
	It was not necessary to adapt	2	3.4%

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research (2023).

It is worth noting that, although the home space offers leisure possibilities, Lobato, Hamoy, and Bahia (2023, p 279) point out that this residential space can “[...] limit the playful dynamics of certain leisure practices, as well as hinder processes of interaction and sociability among individuals”. Thus, in the context of the pandemic, the mentioned authors suggest that, due to the impossibility of enjoying leisure outside the home, people were “trapped”. For these authors, during the pandemic, people experienced leisure metaphorically referred to by them as “imprisoned”, in which “[...] practices are marked by social, economic, political, and environmental issues that limit the experience of leisure” (Lobato; Hamoy; Bahia, 2023, p. 280).

In an attempt to adapt leisure at home, the internet during the pandemic was the main refuge for those who had access, as a way to compensate for the in-person restrictions. In the pursuit of this virtual leisure/entertainment, among 86.6% (n=52) of the research participants, there was a considerable increase in the consumption of streaming services⁸ (Table 4). According to them, for almost 90% of respondents, consuming content on these platforms was very important during the pandemic, as it not only provided distraction from everything happening in the world but also facilitated social interaction through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Table 4: Consumption of streaming services during the Covid-19 pandemic

⁸ *Streaming* is a technology that allows access and transmission of online content using devices connected to the internet, including downloads and *offline* access to film, music, and other multimedia services. Some examples of platforms frequently used in Brazil: Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max, Disney Plus, and Globoplay are platforms that were widely used during the pandemic as alternative entertainment.

Question	Answer	N	%
Has there been an increase in streaming consumption in your home during the Covid-19 pandemic?	Yes	52	86.6%
	No	8	13.4%

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research (2023).

According to Ribeiro (2022, p. 6), the internet and ICT during the pandemic facilitated “[...] access to communication and the search for information, in addition to becoming an important tool for social contact”. In this regard, online sociability was an alternative for social connection, allowing people to communicate and interact through different platforms and social networks, such as: WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, among others – a fact that possibly contributed to maintaining mental health, given that people often felt lonely during this period. This reality corroborates the importance of sociability in society, even in a restrictive and remote scenario, as interaction between individuals was exercised (Simmel, 2006).

On the other hand, the mentioned author points out that “[...] although the internet, technological advances, and social networks have facilitated access [...], excessive exposure to digital environments can become problematic, bringing consequences for users’ well-being and health” (Ribeiro, 2022, p. 6). Furthermore, according to the author, the excessive use of these technologies causes impacts that “[...] include digital addiction, depression, anxiety, impulsivity, sleep disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders, as well as changes in behavior and family and social relationships” (Ribeiro, 2022, p. 6). Therefore, as a **fourth lesson**, it is understood that: *although the increase in streaming, social networks, and media consumption was important for leisure and entertainment, dysfunctional use of these technologies may have contributed to the psychological disturbances – stress, anxiety, and depression – reported by participants.*

When it comes to the benefits of leisure for mental health, in turn, research participants gave a positive assessment when asked about the relationship between leisure and mental health. This evaluation was carried out on a scale from 0 to 10, where 71.6% (n=43) of participants gave the maximum score (10), considering leisure beneficial to human psychosocial health (Chart 5). Additionally, when asked about the role of leisure in an individual's life, 93.33% (n=56) indicated it as “Essential”. Therefore, **as a fifth lesson**, it is concluded that: the pandemic revealed the essential nature of leisure and its benefits for the balance and/or maintenance of human psychological health.

Table 5: Representative scale from 0 to 10 on the influence of leisure on mental health according to the perception of respondents

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
n	n=1	n=0	n=0	n=0	n=1	n=0	n=3	n=5	n=7	n=43
%	1.7%				1.7%		5%	8.3%	11.6%	71.6%

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research (2023).

In this regard, for respondents 01, 04, and 05, leisure is, respectively:

[...] an essential practice for the individual and a right for everyone. The practice of leisure becomes a determining factor for a quality life. Leisure is the “escape valve” for everyday life and for recharging one’s energy after a stressful or tiring routine. Leisure becomes a practice that leads to relaxation, also serving as an alternative for those who wish to treat anxiety, depression, or even panic (Respondent 01).

[...] a form of reward amidst the obligations of a work/study routine (Respondent 04).

[...] something essential in an individual’s life, as it provides moments of rest, fun, and energy recovery. It contributes to emotional balance, improves mental health, and enhances quality of life. Leisure also allows for skill development, stimulates creativity, and strengthens interpersonal relationships. It is important to find time for pleasurable and relaxing activities (Respondent 05).

When analyzing the perspective of most respondents regarding the meaning of leisure, it is noticeable that their interpretations are often related to leisure as a post-work reward, a bonus after a tiring routine, as something to be experienced during non-working time, or merely as an escape from problems—be they emotional, psychological, or physical. Such understandings corroborate the review made by Krippendorff (2001) to the “cycle of human reconstitution”, which is characteristic of industrial society and in which leisure is no longer considered for the practice itself, but as a form of escape from everyday life.

This notion arises from a mistaken representation of leisure since the Industrial Revolution, which consisted of viewing it merely as the opposite of work. Later, the achievement of non-working time enabled new interpretations of free time, as evidenced in Bramante’s argument (1998, p. 11): “[...] The dimension of ‘non-work’ may assume an extraordinary nuance for the experience of human essence, through the conquest of a time of ‘non-utility’ in the face of increasing pressures to always assign some purpose or use to time”.

Although new meanings have been attributed to the essence of leisure over time, remnants of this limited idea about the topic still exist. This differs from the theories of many authors who describe the main motivations for experiencing the various existing forms of leisure. Bramante (1998, p. 1) highlights the importance of external detachment when he states that: “The more gratuitous, without rigidly established purposes, aimed at full internal satisfaction, and under personal control, the greater and better the quality of the leisure experience”. However, there is still no consistent education concerned with deconstructing the superficial idea of leisure, making it difficult to fully understand the experience.

Final Considerations

Considering the objective of this study—to analyze the influence of leisure on people's mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on the perceptions of residents of the Metropolitan Region of Belém (RMB)—the results of this research provided valuable insights into the fundamental role of leisure as a personal necessity during the Covid-19 pandemic, a challenging period that exposed many people to emotional and psychological problems arising from confinement, leisure restrictions, and the challenges of the pandemic itself.

Before the pandemic, about 28.3% of respondents reported having some psychological or emotional disorder, while the majority stated they did not have such problems. However, during the pandemic, many participants revealed they developed emotional issues such as stress and anxiety, showing a significant impact on the population's mental health. The lockdown period was identified by most participants as a determining factor in the increase of stress and anxiety levels. Furthermore, most respondents knew at least one person in their social circle who developed depression during the pandemic. These results highlight the magnitude of the psychological impacts caused by the Covid-19 context, reinforcing the need to understand the role of leisure in promoting mental health.

Sociability, which is essential for human development, was also affected, as many group leisure practices were limited by health restrictions. The lack of socialization and the restrictions imposed during quarantine were key factors in the development or worsening of stress, anxiety, and depression. Although many managed to adapt their leisure activities to the home environment, some found themselves completely deprived of such practices. The predominance of streaming content and

service consumption during the pandemic, as reported by interviewees, highlights a significant change in virtual leisure consumption patterns.

The lessons learned from this research are diverse and fundamental for understanding the impact of leisure on mental health during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, the population's lack of psychological preparedness to deal with large-scale events like this is evident. Additionally, the importance of social interaction and leisure as essential elements for psychosocial health was demonstrated, as well as the capacity for adaptation and resilience in the face of restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

Those who stayed at home reported a significant increase in the consumption of streaming services, which not only met their entertainment needs but also served as a way to maintain social connections from a distance. However, it is important to recognize that this increase in consumption was not uniform, as some people faced financial difficulties or access restrictions, revealing pre-existing social inequalities. Moreover, the increase in digital technology use, while providing entertainment, may also have contributed to psychological problems, emphasizing the importance of balanced and conscious use of these tools.

The pandemic brought to light the essential nature of leisure as a fundamental resource for human psychological well-being, highlighting its relevance for emotional balance and mental health in times of crisis. These lessons provide valuable insights for public policies and intervention practices aimed at promoting mental health in contexts of adversity such as the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, although most respondents recognize the importance of leisure for mental health, some still view it superficially, considering it merely a distraction from problems. This point underscores

the need for a deeper and broader understanding of the role of leisure in promoting psychological well-being.

It is therefore evident the importance of the State's role in democratizing access to leisure, which is recognized as a social right. In times of crisis such as the pandemic, it becomes crucial for the State to adopt measures to ensure that restrictions do not exclude access to leisure, including support for online initiatives and subsidies for virtual events. Beyond physical health risks, the crisis had significant impacts on mental health, worsening the challenges faced by those without adequate financial resources. Thus, public policies aimed at promoting leisure and mental health must be implemented and strengthened to mitigate the negative effects of crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic on the population.

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