

THE SENSE OF COHERENCE

and its role in reducing the psychosocial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Protective factors are all those things that help us to adapt better and protect our mental health. **Mental health** (see glossary) is an integral part of overall health, **and we can protect it by addressing the factors that play a role in determining it.** Like physical health, mental health is influenced by individual, family, community, and social (or structural) factors.^{1,2}

The sense of coherence, a protective factor identified in Antonovsky's salutogenic model (see glossary), reflects a person's vision of life and their capacity for reacting to stressful situations. It is a **psychological coping strategy**, consisting of three **elements (cognitive, emotional and behavioural)**, that allows people to view everyday situations as structured and comprehensible, meaningful and manageable. It also represents a person's **capacity to identify their internal and external resources and to use them in a way that promotes health and well-being.**^{3, 4, 5}

Studies conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other situations, show that there is a positive correlation between the sense of coherence and mental health. In fact, people with a high sense of coherence perceive life events as comprehensible and manageable.

They also believe that life's challenges represent a potential source of growth. Conversely, people with a low sense of coherence experience more psychopathological symptoms.^{5,6}

STRENGTHENING THE SENSE OF COHERENCE FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

The salutogenic model can be used to identify two key processes: **empowerment** and **reflection**. These two processes, which address the behavioural and cognitive elements, have the capacity to strengthen the sense of coherence which, in turn, has an effect on health promotion.

Empowerment allows individuals to **make use of the available resources**. For its part, **reflection** helps with an understanding **of the current situation and the identification of resources** that can be used to cope with stressful situations.



A FEW COURSES OF ACTION

- Organize activities that promote empowerment to help people **draw and reflect on** their existing resources.
- Organize activities that broaden the scope of the reflection (beyond the individual), to take a **critical look at the** environment (community, municipality, etc.) and at obstacles or opportunities created by the latter.
- Put in place **collective strategies** involving **various environments, sectors, and stakeholders**.
- Organize activities that promote **inclusion** (more vulnerable populations, minorities, elderly, etc.), as well as **collaborative** and **interdisciplinary work** (intersectoral action).
- Organize activities adapted **to the situation** (historical, social, cultural, religious, etc.).
- Organize **mindfulness** activities that could help people to cope with stressful situations by focusing on the present, without judgment, rather than being carried away by their emotions and worrying about potential future problems.

GLOSSARY

Mental health: A state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stress of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”⁷

Salutogenic model: Centred around the idea that health results from continuous everyday life interactions between the individual and inevitable social, economic, cultural, physical, mental, and biochemical stressors. It focuses on factors that promote health and well-being, instead of on the underlying elements of disease⁸.

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