



Flower therapy in holistic care for the population during the COVID-19 pandemic

A terapia floral no cuidado integral à população durante a pandemia de COVID-19

João Paulo Lopes da Silva^{1}, Maria do Socorro Trindade Morais²*

¹Mestre em Saúde Coletiva pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Saúde Coletiva, Universidade Federal da Paraíba, João Pessoa (PB), Brasil; ²Docente do Departamento de Promoção de Saúde. Universidade Federal da Paraíba. João Pessoa (PB), Brasil.

*Corresponding author: João Paulo Lopes da Silva¹— *E-mail*: jplopes_pb@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to: describe the profile of users who sought flower therapy as a comprehensive care strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify the main health causes that led them to opt for this integrative practice. It was a descriptive study with a qualitative approach, conducted with users of the extension project “Integrative and complementary practices in health” during the remote service in flower therapy, carried out between July and November 2020. The data were processed by lexical analysis, using the word cloud resource, and analyzed by Bardin’s content analysis technique. Among the health needs that motivated the search for flower therapy, there was a predominance in the enunciations of anxiety, fear, insecurity, and insomnia. The study found that social isolation affected the health of users, generating an imbalance in feelings and emotions, and the use of flower essences emerged as a therapeutic possibility to control emotions.

Keywords: Flower Essences. Flower therapy. SARS-CoV-2.

RESUMO

O presente estudo objetivou: descrever o perfil dos usuários que buscaram a terapia floral como estratégia de cuidado integral durante a pandemia de COVID-19; e identificar as principais causas de saúde que os levaram a optar por essa prática integrativa. Estudo descritivo com abordagem qualitativa, realizado com usuários do projeto de extensão “Práticas Integrativas e Complementares em Saúde”, durante o teleatendimento em terapia floral, realizado entre julho e novembro de 2020. Os dados foram tratados pela análise lexical, utilizando o recurso da Nuvem de Palavras e analisados pela Técnica de Análise de Conteúdo de Bardin. Entre as necessidades de saúde que motivaram a busca pela terapia floral, houve predominância nas enunciações de ansiedade, medo, insegurança e insônia. Constatou-se que o isolamento social afetou a saúde dos usuários, gerando desequilíbrio nos sentimentos e emoções e que o uso das essências florais emergiu como uma possibilidade terapêutica para controle das emoções.

Palavras-chave: Essências Florais. Terapia floral. SARS-CoV-2.

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, has caused numerous restrictions necessary to prevent the spread of the virus on the world population. Discovered in December 2019 in China, this virus, which causes the disease called "COVID-19," is the agent of the first pandemic of the Twenty-First Century. Its humanitarian cost has exceeded 221,134,742 confirmed cases worldwide, impacting 4,574,089 deaths by the beginning of September 2021. In Brazil, the first recorded case occurred in the city of São Paulo on February 26, 2020^{1, 2, 3}.

Given this challenge, several measures to control and prevent the disease were taken by local health authorities in different administrative spheres, with variations from one region to another in the country. The most widespread prophylactic measure by health authorities was the practice of social distancing, generally understood by the population and the media as social isolation².

The process of social isolation has caused serious economic, social, political, and especially health impacts on the population. Most clinical and scientific efforts have been directed to reduce the effects of the virus on physical health, but the consequences of social isolation on mental health have been little discussed and studied, despite the repercussions on the emotional and psychic dimensions of people^{4, 5}.

Taking care of the body and mind has become complex since it involves not only the organic scope but, also, emotional, mental, and spiritual. As a possibility of care for coping with symptoms caused by social isolation, Integrative and Complementary Practices in Health (ICPH) can contribute to physical, energetic, and emotional balance, relieving stress and anxiety, which interfere with health and are experienced by many people⁶.

The use of integrative practices for therapeutic purposes has been encouraged since

the 1970s by the World Health Organization and they are based on the National Policy of Integrative and Complementary practices (NPICP). Its approaches seek to stimulate the natural mechanisms of disease prevention and health recovery through effective and safe technologies, with emphasis on welcoming listening, the development of the therapeutic bond, and the integration of the human being with the environment and society⁷.

Scientific evidence has shown the benefits of care associated between conventional medicine and integrative and complementary practices. Thus, considering this scenario of uncertainties that have become part of our daily lives, maintaining the balance of emotions has been challenging. That said, the use of ICPH can be a great ally in the care of people's mental health^{2, 8, 9}.

In this context, among the ICPH with the heightened potential of symptom care during the pandemic, the use of flower therapy has been a tool for balancing feelings and emotions. Bach flower remedies are part of an emerging field of vibrational therapies, of non-invasive characteristics, which act in the care of the individuals and not the disease, harmonizing their emotional condition so that, through transformation into more positive states, they can stimulate his own potential for self-healing^{10, 11}.

An English physician named Edward Bach discovered the flower essences and dedicated himself to unraveling the healing nature of flowers. Through his studies, he concluded that to obtain healing, people need to cling to a goal and that flowers can release negative feelings accumulated in human life^{10, 12}.

For the choice of essences, the professional considers the state of mind and nature of the individual, aiming at the balance restoration and providing subsidies such as freedom so that the body begins its self-healing. In situations of overcoming obstacles, flower therapy is expressively required, enabling

changes in personality, such as the cessation of habits considered uncontrollable, modifying feelings of failure and anguish for a renewed emotional state¹⁰.

Flower therapy is part of the set of ICPH that share the paradigms of vitalism and holism. Vitalism establishes that life is movement before all, based on a dynamic principle that animates the organism's functioning, seen as a living unit. Holism affirms that the microcosm (each living being) manifests the macrocosm in its constitution and functioning, i.e., "the complex order present in the universe and its harmony." Thus, health is the result of being in harmony with our own nature and doing the work tailored ideally for us as an individual^{13,14}.

The mechanism of action of flower essences can be explained by quantum theory, according to which electromagnetic energy is transmitted not linearly but in energy packets (quantum). The evolution in quantum knowledge has allowed the proposition of concepts that contribute to a better understanding of the flower essence and its transformations in specific biochemical responses capable of altering the biological response that coordinates neurotransmitters, neuropeptides, and hormones, modulating the way of thinking, feeling, and acting¹⁵.

Evidence has shown that ICPH have contributed to the reduction of various symptoms and to mental health care. Flower therapy has been pointed out as a therapeutic possibility for health care in times of pandemic. This article decided to approach flower therapy in the principles proposed by Edward Bach since it is a very studied system and has shown satisfactory efficacy.

From this perspective, despite the fact that social distancing triggers several feelings that negatively affect the mental health of individuals, considering the existing therapeutic possibilities, the study starts from the following guiding question: What is the profile and the main health causes of users who sought Bach flower therapy as holistic care during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The present study aims to describe the profile of users who sought flower therapy as a comprehensive care strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify the main health causes that led them to opt for this integrative practice. The use of flower therapy can bring numerous benefits, contributing to the search for comprehensive health care and reducing public spending. It can also act in health promotion as an adjuvant in conventional treatments, improving energy fields and transforming negative mental and emotional states into positive ones, with consequent improvement in quality of life.

METHODOLOGY

This is exploratory, descriptive research with a qualitative approach, carried out with the use of the database of registration of the actions of the extension project "Integrative and Complementary Practices in Care" of the Center for Medical Sciences (CMS) of the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). This project was executed in 2020 and sought to promote comprehensive care to the population through the remote service in flower therapy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was founded in 2016, and its primary objective is to stimulate the teaching and practice of ICPH.

The population of this study is composed of users who were assisted through remote service by twenty flower therapists, with scheduled appointments, through video calls or chat on WhatsApp or Skype. At the end of the session, the therapist provided, within 24 hours, the personalized and individualized therapeutic indication for the user to manipulate.

Data collection was carried out in the extension project database, which contains the medical records of the assisted users, considering the period from July to November 2020. Researchers collected information referred to the participants' characterization and main health causes that led them to seek flower therapy as a care option.

Researchers used simple descriptive statistics for the participants' characterization to operationalize the data. They used the software IRaMuTeQ (*Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires*) 0.6 alpha 3, Brazilian version, to assist in the qualitative data organization, referring to the health needs that led the participants to use flower therapy as a care option. The software develops statistical analyses on text segments, pictures of individuals, and words¹⁶.

When constructing the figure, the study used the word cloud (WC), which consists of a simpler lexical analysis that groups and organizes the words graphically according to the frequency with which they are used. This resource can choose different fonts, word layouts, and color schemes for easy viewing. The WCs are, therefore, the representation of a visually hierarchical list, whose size of each word indicates its frequency in the text, admitted as proxy of relevance of a particular theme. In this analysis, the study chose a higher frequency equal to five to generate more understandable figures^{16,17}.

The interpretative analysis of the content generated in the corpus was based on Bardin's Content Analysis¹⁸, which consists of a set of techniques that make it possible to analyze communication with the aim of identifying, through systematic procedures, what a group of people manifests on a given topic.

The study respected the ethical aspects, following the norms for research with human beings—resolution of the National Health Council, n° 466, of December 12, 2012. The project was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Center for Medical Sciences (CMS) of UFPB, under CAAE 31543820.9.0000.8069.

RESULTS

Flower therapy, created by Edward Bach, is a non-pharmacological reactionary clinical

psychotherapy characterized as a therapy that uses the vibrational pattern of certain flowers, plants, and trees to balance negative thoughts and emotions and personality disorders that are potential causes of disease. Flower essences are produced when flowers, immersed in water, transfer their own vibrational characteristics to it. Flower remedies act by bringing harmony to the physical, emotional, psychic, and spiritual dimensions of individuals^{10,19}.

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated several psychoemotional implications. Feelings such as fear and insecurity emerged as one of the psychoemotional aspects most exacerbated by the pandemic situation, in which increased levels of anxiety and stress were observed in healthy people and intensification of symptoms in those with pre-existing psychiatric disorders^{20,21}.

The extension project "Integrative and Complementary Practices in Care" of the Center for Medical Sciences (CMS) of the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) previously worked in a Basic Family Health Unit in the municipality of João Pessoa, State of Paraíba (PB), serving the local population through the use of ICPH such as auriculotherapy and Bach flower therapy. The care was provided by undergraduate students from several health courses linked to the project.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the project initially did not provide care. However, due to the increase in cases of people with anxiety and other psychoemotional symptoms, the management decided to provide teleservice as a way of assisting these people and selected Bach flower therapy for the practice. After training the student therapists for this new modality, the disclosures and appointments were made through video call or chat on WhatsApp or Skype.

The visits generated a database with records of the patients' teleservices, recorded by the flower therapists. This study performed a cut of the data. Thus, with a view to a better understanding of the results, it decided to

initially characterize the participant population that sought the use of flower therapy as a support alternative to establish their health; then, the word cloud method performed the lexical analysis.

Regarding the characterization of the participating users, the project helped about 511 users, of which 292 were new participants and 219 returned for a new appointment. Females were the ones who sought the highest number of consultations (82%). This absence of male demand for health care is a cultural issue.

Gender-related factors exert a strong influence, often even as an obstacle. Men are resistant to taking care of their health due to feelings of fear, shame, and behavioral causes such as impatience and carelessness, which have been a significant weight in increasing rates of male morbidity and mortality²².

Concerning age, flower therapy was sought by users of different ages, with a predominance of younger patients, from 20 to 40 years old (57%). The lowest percentages were for use in children, corresponding to 3% of the sample. The use of Bach flower remedies has become more frequent and has shown satisfactory results for all ages, from babies to the elderly. The World Health Organization recognize them as a natural, harmless, and preventive method within individualized therapies²³.

There is a growing acceptance that numerous diseases are triggered or exacerbated by mental issues related to thoughts and feelings that generate emotions (such as fear), emotional instability, and bad mood. Due to the pandemic, the current world scenario has posed some challenges to the population, among them the need for prolonged social isolation due to changes in coronavirus strains and the delay in vaccinating the population. As a consequence, the population has experienced a higher level of psychic suffering than in other periods of history²⁴.

In this context, when asked if they are maintaining social isolation because of the

pandemic issues, 75% of the participants reported keeping distance and obeying the restrictive measures recommended by the health authorities. They say they leave their homes only to conduct essential activities, such as working, shopping in supermarkets, pharmacies, amongst others. Research found that 42% of the participating users are working and have followed the hygiene and distancing protocols to avoid contamination and spread of the virus.

When asked if they had COVID-19 or related symptoms, 94% reported not having presented any symptoms related to the disease, only 5% declared having tested positive with mild symptoms, and 1% had symptoms similar to COVID-19, however, when performing the test, the result was negative, ruling out the disease.

Symptoms of COVID-19 usually include fever, cough, fatigue, diarrhea, dyspnea, hemoptysis, headache, and lymphopenia may also occur. Some users present with mild symptoms; however, this clinical picture may change according to age, the existence of previous comorbidities, and the immune status of the patient²⁵. Some users may acquire the disease and be asymptomatic.

As the disease progresses and periods of social isolation are prolonged, various negative feelings associated with loneliness threaten the psychological integrity of the population. This issue has been more aggravated among those who present a more vulnerable financial or social situation⁵.

The isolation and/or social distancing recommended by the health authorities, although it was the best strategy to prevent the contamination of the disease, also worsened mental health and exacerbated some symptoms such as anxiety. The pandemic has generated fear, anguish and concern, and emotional conditions that cause psychic suffering²⁶.

Asked about the health causes that led the participants to seek flower therapy as a care strategy, they were categorical in pointing out

that they needed vital strengthening and believed that Bach flower remedies would be a great possibility of care. This response was prevalent in users who already knew the therapy or who had already sought information about it.

Based on the reports expressed by users, various feelings and emotions emerged. They were grouped in the word cloud for better analysis and visualization.



Figure 1. Word cloud.

The reading of the enunciations originated by the frequencies in the WC exposed that there is a diversity of emotions and feelings involved and that these were the reasons why they sought Bach flower therapy, considering that the vital field of these patients was weakened due to the isolation process. The analysis showed that the most frequent words were: “anxiety” (191 times), “fear” (130 times), “insecurity” (82 times), and “insomnia” (81 times) (Figure 1).

As a highlight, during the teleservice, the above-mentioned users reported that social isolation directly influenced their negative feelings concerning the way they lived. Feelings of incapacity, despair, frustration, and irritability were constant in his speeches.

According to Araújo, Silva, and Bastos²⁷, any emotion experienced over a long period alters and influences the way we live and respond to life situations.

Among the words most enunciated by users, “anxiety” had more evocations and can be understood as a state of absolute fear that

paralyzes the subject extraordinarily. It is most often associated with the loss of control of emotion, feelings, and behavior and may have concerns related to future danger and alert or avoidance behaviors²⁶.

Anxiety is one of the behaviors most closely related to psychosomatic illnesses. It is not only a pathology in itself but also worsens other health problems, such as depression, stress, anxiety, insomnia, hypertension, and gastritis, among others, with an alarming increase affecting people at all stages of life (childhood, adolescence, adults and the elderly)^{26,28,29}.

Related to anxiety, fear was a predominant feeling in the emotions reported by users. It acts as an alarm to announce dangerous situations, which is natural, however, when it exceeds the threshold of normality, it becomes very intense, and this can paralyze or mentally imprison people, aggravating possible psychopathologies²⁹.

The study by Wang and collaborators³⁰ with 1,210 participants demonstrated moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety, depression, and

stress in the respondents, of which 75.2% reported being afraid of their family members contracting the disease, demonstrating this impact on mental health.

“Fear” was the second most evoked word and was related to the fear of contracting COVID-19 and death, considering that the scenario pointed to several patient deaths due to the disease. It has caused a feeling of insecurity in all aspects of life, from the collective to the individual perspective, from the daily functioning of society to changes in interpersonal relationships. “Insomnia” was also widely cited, being linked to feelings of anxiety, fear, and insecurity²⁴.

Research conducted by Bezerra, Silva, Soares, and Silva² pointed out stress as one of the main consequences of social isolation. The data presented showed that 73% of the participants reported some degree of stress due to the situation of social isolation, which suggests the need for research in the field to provide more effective answers to the problem.

The exacerbated stress can trigger various negative symptoms and lead people to become depressed; it can interfere with the immune system, weakening them and leaving them more susceptible to the spread of diseases. In this sense, flower remedies contribute to softening the moment we live, balancing thoughts and softening various feelings²⁷.

The emotions and feelings expressed in the word cloud have increased significantly

among subjects with a higher level of social and economic vulnerability². Considering that comprehensive care through ICPH minimizes side effects and has a lower financial cost, people have increasingly adhered to these forms of self-care.

In this sense, flower therapy has gained adherence as a strategy to balance nosographic conditions, acting on the cause of emotional and physical imbalances. It can be indicated for disorders in different fields, such as affectivity, physical body, creativity, and spirituality⁵.

In his essays, Bach¹¹ describes that specific thoughts generate emotions that trigger behaviors that lead to the emergence of diseases. After testing several species of plants and observing the influence on their behavior, they cataloged thirty-eight flower essences, dividing them into seven basic emotions present in the human psyche: fear, indecision, lack of interest, loneliness/isolation, excessive sensitivity, despair/despondency, exorbitant concern for the well-being of the other.

Based on the feelings mentioned and the classification of the seven basic emotions of the human psyche, the flower therapists prescribed the flower essence individually or combined based on the users' listening. In the table below, the feelings with the highest number of evocations and the flower essences that help alleviate the symptoms are listed.

Chart 1. Distribution of the most requested flower essences at the time of consultation

FEELING	FLOWER ESSENCES	ACTION OF ESSENCE
Anxiety	Impatiens, Oak, Pine, Rock Rose and Rock Water	Flower essences that help to quiet the soul and develop empathy, delicacy of feelings, and patience, leading to acceptance of the rhythm of others and the unfolding of events.
Fear	Rock Rose, Mimulus, Cherry Plum, Aspen, Red Chestnut.	Flower essences that arouse encouragement to perform the simplest actions of everyday life and face the most challenging ones.
Insecurity	Cerato, Scleranthus, Gentian, Wild Oat, Gorse, Hornbeam.	Flower essences that lead to assertiveness, clarity of purpose, vigor, hope, optimism, and faith.
Insomnia	Hornbeam, Star Of Bethlehem, Beech, Willow, Impatiens, Vervain, Cherry Plum, Agrimony, Olive.	Flower essences that lead to feeling safe to face day-to-day routines and situations that would clearly put you in crisis.

Source: The authors, 2020.

As noted, several flower essentials are grouped to treat the same emotion so that they are used simultaneously, in synergy, considering that one symptom is related to others. Thus, this grouping of essences helps to alleviate the discomfort caused by daily emotions.

It is not possible to have a single formula for all individuals since everyone perceives and reacts to the world and experiences individually. However, the feelings of fear, anxiety, and excessive worry, among other emotions, emerge more frequently at times when the individual faces difficulties; the use of flower remedies helps in their emotional and mental rebalancing¹².

The energy potential of flowers is what underpins this therapy. It favors and enables the restoration of peace, harmony, and balance of the human being²⁷. Flower essences also have an energetic potential linked to the harmonic electromagnetic conformation of their particles, which is a characteristic of plants: when this conformation comes into contact with the disharmonious electromagnetic field, it can harmonize it through subtle energy waves, balancing the energy flows of these fields to which they are assigned^{11,23}.

The effects of essences act only on the level of subtle energy fields and not on

dense and condensed ones, such as physical organs. However, by producing harmonization in electromagnetic fields and transforming subtle inharmonic networks into constant and uniform energy flows, significant effects are evidenced in the emotional states of human beings, so that this can produce mechanisms of improvements in organic systems^{8,23}.

Users report that, after using the flower essences, they showed improvement in their symptomatology, better balancing emotions, and, consequently, their physical, psychic, and social condition. Some reported improved quality of life and coping with feelings of isolation, decreased fear and anxiety, provided by the pandemic.

Literature has already proven that, through some clinical studies, the flower therapy effectiveness in emotional balance, such as fear, anxiety, insomnia, and loss of control in some situations^{8,19,23,28}. It was evidenced that 80% of people who used flower therapy showed improvement in concentration, calmness, and clarity of ideas; 60% reported less irritability in a situation that commonly displeased them; and 40% improved their sleep pattern^{12,23,27}.

The limitation of this study is related to the small population sample, which weakens the generalization of the results found; there

was also a lack of more effective and continuous monitoring of the assisted population regarding the annotation of information in the medical records, which would have provided a deepening of emotions and results.

The use of flower therapy in the studied population showed satisfactory results in the balance of emotions and symptoms relief related to anxiety caused by social isolation. Flower remedies are one of the most used ICPH today, widely indicated, and the possibility of isolated or complementary use.

Although it is one of the ICPH recognized and cataloged in the list of integrative therapies of the SUS, public health policies should consider investments in the training of professionals and dissemination of these practices as an alternative for health promotion and disease prevention. Its benefits in controlling emotions are proven, and the balance of this vital field is essential for the population's quality of life.

CONCLUSION

The flower essences help to recover the internal balance, generating a sense of well-being in the subjects. Based on the results, the study evidenced that the participants are mostly young people, female, and have several feelings, emotions, and behaviors that motivated them to seek the use of Bach flowers remedies, among which anxiety, fear, insecurity, and insomnia were the most evoked. Despite being emotions and symptoms already experienced by the participants, the advent of the pandemic intensified them and took the situation to unbearable levels.

The use of Bach flower remedies indicated in therapeutic appointments collaborated coping with feelings developed or exacerbated by the pandemic. Most of the participants reported improvement in their symptoms, increased confidence, and a greater balance of the energy

and emotional field, which has positively influenced their quality of life.

The findings presented here corroborate research on the effectiveness of flower therapy in helping to control emotions. The study recommends the publication of clinical studies with a more robust population to better demonstrate this practice, which has much to contribute to the science and improvement of holistic care to the individual through health promotion in an integral and humanized way.

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