






## Repercussions of COVID-19 and possibilities for promoting health: thinking with nursing students

*Repercussões da COVID-19 e as possibilidades para promover saúde: reflexões com estudantes de enfermagem*

*Repercusiones del COVID-19 y las posibilidades de promover la salud: reflexiones junto a estudiantes de enfermería*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to understand the repercussions of COVID-19 and possibilities for health promotion in combating the pandemic, as perceived by undergraduate nursing students. **Method:** this qualitative, participatory-action study rested on Paulo Freire's Research Itinerary, which comprises three dialectical phases: Thematic Investigation; Encoding and Decoding; Critical Unveiling. After approval by the Research Ethics Committee, two Virtual Culture Circles were held in October 2020 with the participation of 23 nursing students at a public university in southern Brazil, but living in different places. **Results:** two themes were discussed: repercussions of COVID-19 and possibilities for health promotion. The impacts of the pandemic were clearly reflected in the students' biopsychosocial and spiritual well-being. **Conclusions:** it is urgent to promote students' health with a view to uncovering feelings and announcing strategies for overcoming difficulties, with an emphasis on awakening the capacity for coping and resilience.

**Descriptors:** Pandemics; Coronavirus Infections; COVID-19; Health Promotion; Nursing, Students.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** compreender as repercussões da COVID-19 e as possibilidades para promover a saúde no enfrentamento da pandemia, na percepção de estudantes de graduação em enfermagem. **Método:** estudo qualitativo, do tipo ação-participante, fundamentado no Itinerário de Pesquisa de Paulo Freire, que possui três fases dialéticas: Investigação Temática; Codificação e Descodificação; Desvelamento Crítico. Realizou-se dois Círculos de Cultura Virtual em outubro de 2020, após aprovação do Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa, com a participação de 23 estudantes de enfermagem de uma universidade pública do sul do Brasil, residentes em diferentes localidades. **Resultados:** discutiu-se sobre dois temas: repercussões da COVID-19 e possibilidades para promover sua saúde. Ficou evidente que os impactos da pandemia refletiram no bem-estar biopsicossocial e espiritual dos estudantes. **Conclusões:** é premente promover a saúde dos estudantes na perspectiva do desnudar sentimentos e anunciar estratégias para superação das dificuldades, com ênfase no despertar da capacidade de enfrentamento e resiliência.

**Descritores:** Pandemias; Infecções por Coronavírus; COVID-19; Promoção da Saúde; Estudantes de Enfermagem.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** comprender las repercusiones del COVID-19 y las posibilidades de promover la salud en el enfrentamiento de la pandemia, desde la percepción de estudiantes de pregrado en enfermería. **Método:** estudio cualitativo, acción-participante, basado en el Itinerario de Investigación de Paulo Freire, con tres fases dialéticas: Investigación Temática; Codificación y Decodificación; Desvelamiento Crítico. Se realizaron dos Círculos de Cultura Virtual en octubre de 2020, tras la aprobación del Comité de Ética en Investigación, contando con la participación de 23 estudiantes de enfermería de una universidad pública del sur de Brasil, residentes en diferentes sitios. **Resultados:** se discutieron dos temas: repercusiones del COVID-19 y posibilidades para promover la salud. Se evidenció que los impactos de la pandemia se reflejaron en el bienestar biopsicosocial y espiritual de los estudiantes. **Conclusiones:** urge promover la salud de los estudiantes desde la perspectiva de desnudar sentimientos y anunciar estrategias para superar las dificultades, con énfasis en el despertar de la capacidad de enfrentamiento y resiliencia.

**Descriptor:** Pandemias; Infecciones por Coronavirus; COVID-19; Promoción de la Salud; Estudiantes de Enfermería.

## INTRODUCTION

The world scenario of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has required the adoption of measures to contain the spread of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), establishing the need for social distancing. In Brazil, different sectors have adjusted to the new measures to face the pandemic, which affected the socioeconomic and family dynamics, as well as the mental health of the population<sup>1</sup>. With the changes in the way of living imposed by the pandemic, the educational system has also been affected, leading to the emergence of the remote teaching modality as a possibility to ensure continuity of the teaching-learning process, which demanded the implementation of strategies to comply with the curricular goals related to nurses' training<sup>2</sup>.

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The remarkable onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exerted a direct impact on the conduction of Nursing training activities in universities. In addition to the shutdown of undergraduate activities and of in-person learning, there was uncertainty about the subsequent impacts of that moment, culminating in distancing from family members, delayed educational training, financial difficulties, broken dreams and grief, among other situations that required adjustment to the new global health scenario<sup>3</sup>.

Given the perspective of training future nurses, the relevance of health promotion among the students is pointed out. It is worth highlighting the need to take a close look at the feelings and at the maintenance of a healthy routine that involves diet, physical activity, and regular sleep in this population. In addition to that, continuous contact with family members and friends through the Internet is relevant to mitigate possible feelings such as loneliness, sorrow and fear<sup>2,4</sup>.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to resume the focus on self-care, which, in addition to regulating life functioning itself and human development, is considered to promote individuals' health<sup>4,5</sup>. Thus, during the nurses' training process in pandemic times, it is possible to notice the importance of promoting health, in search of a healthy life, since taking care of others also requires taking self-care<sup>5</sup>.

Considering the above, the following research question was raised: Which are the repercussions of COVID-19 and the possibilities to promote health in facing the pandemic, according to the perception of undergraduate Nursing students? In this context, the study aimed at understanding the repercussions of COVID-19 and the possibilities to promote health in facing the pandemic, according to the perception of undergraduate Nursing students.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study was grounded on Paulo Freire's theoretical and methodological assumptions, which are based on dialog and turns the word in the action, turning it into praxis. Reflecting about the action makes the subjects grasp the reality and, with increased awareness, transform the world through an ethical and humanized relationship, respecting values and beliefs by the dialogical praxis. Within this perspective, it is considered that each subject has their own knowledge that should be recognized for the establishment of kindness and sharing of experiences, with encouragement of autonomy and of critically learning the reality<sup>6</sup>.

Paulo Freire criticizes the banking model of education, which does not stimulate raising critical awareness, and advocates liberating education when substituting the educator's authoritarianism by means of democratic dialog and horizontalized relationships in the different spaces and experiences of the teaching-learning process. In this context, education becomes a political action that is created from the relationship between subjects mediated by cognoscible objects. Such scenario favors engagement in the struggle to reach liberation by means of participation, with consequent empowerment<sup>6</sup>.

## **METHOD**

A qualitative study of the action-participant type<sup>7</sup>, using Paulo Freire's Research Itinerary, which is organized in three dialectic and intertwined phases, namely: Thematic Research (data collection); Coding and Decoding (data collection and analysis); and Critical Unveiling (data analysis)<sup>8,9</sup>.

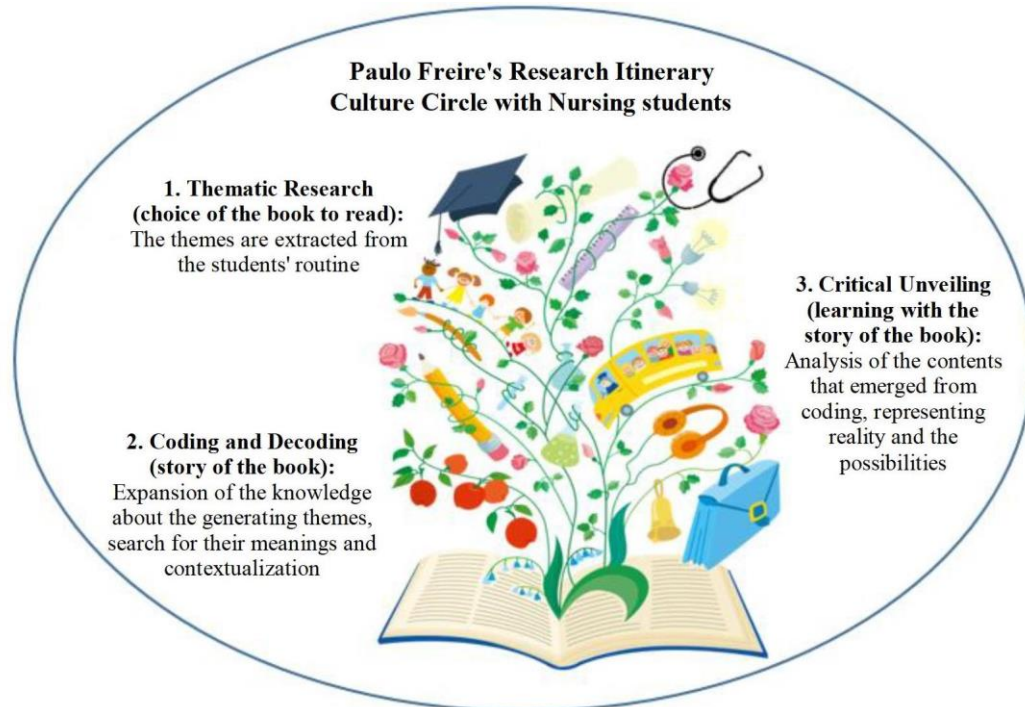
The Culture Circle is the space where the Research Itinerary is developed, and was used as a strategy for data production. Such space is formed by a group of individuals with some common interest who meet to dialog and discuss about their problems and life situations in order to build a deeper perception of reality<sup>8</sup>.

Considering the pandemic context, the Culture Circle was developed in a virtual environment. In this scenario, the Cisco Webex application was used, with the support of electronic devices, which allowed integrating the participants, although they were physically distant. To such end, the first step was to invite 27 students attending the fifth phase of an undergraduate Nursing course from a public university in southern Brazil.

The process to recruit the participants occurred during a remote lesson of the curricular component called "Nursing care in basic health care", which is taught by the researchers. It is noted that selection was intentional in view of the researchers' proximity to the group of students. The inclusion criteria considered were the following: students aged over 18 years old and who were active participants in the classes from the fifth phase of the Nursing course. The exclusion criteria were students without Internet access or with unstable connections, as well as those who did not have an electronic device available at the time of the Culture Circle meetings. Thus, the study participants were 23 Nursing students.

The Virtual Culture Circle (VCC) was developed in two meetings held in October 2020, lasting two hours each, under mediation of a nurse, the first author of this article, who has experience in the conduction of this type of approach. Another researcher provided her support to assist in the recording in the field diary. The meetings were recorded with the participants' due authorization.

In order to promote playfulness and to favor interaction between the participants, it was decided to make an analogy between the Research Itinerary stages and a book, which reflects knowledge and is something concrete in the Nursing students' lives (Figure 1). The life book metaphor was used while conducting the VCC.



**FIGURE 1** - Freire's Research itinerary: analogy with the book. Chapecó, SC, Brazil, 2020.  
Source: Adapted by the authors from <https://imagensemoldes.com.br/historia-livro-png/>

The Thematic Research phase took place in the first meeting, with the purpose of discussing the importance of self-care and of caring for others. Initially, the mediator emphasized that each person chooses the books they wish to read and that each individual has their own life book. This book reflects their stories and their experiences, and has blank pages, which are yet to be filled in with reflections on the way each individual promotes their health and develops self-care. This activity gave rise to broad conversations about the multiple impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the students' lives.

Subsequently, the mediator proposed a triggering question (Which are the repercussions of COVID-19 in your life book?) and invited the participants to answer it by introducing a significant term in the shared computer screen using the Jamboard app. Then, there was collective reading of all the terms, for the purposes of group validation and introduction of new meanings, culminating in the identification of two generating themes for discussion in the VCC, namely: 1) Repercussions of COVID-19; and 2) Possibilities to promote your health.

In the second meeting, the mediator used the figure of a book to retrieve the terms that emerged from the previous VCC. Subsequently, she formulated a specific question for each generating theme (Which are the repercussions of COVID-19? Which are the possibilities to promote your health?), signaling the beginning of the Coding and Decoding stage. The participants answered the questions on a sheet of paper. In order to harmonize the moment of elaboration of answers, the mediator presented a video clip of the song "*Pausa*" ("Pause"), by Vicka.

In this process, all the Nursing students had the opportunity to dialog about their perceptions regarding the two themes, sharing their experiences in a virtual environment with plenty of affection, meaning, kindness and respect, and also permeated by the critical and reflective exchange of knowledge, based on Freire's assumptions<sup>8-9</sup>.

For the Critical Unveiling of the generating themes, the third stage of the Research Itinerary, the mediator highlighted the lessons learned and meanings that the students shared in facing COVID-19, which were elaborated by means of collective and individual awareness of each shared experience and unveiling limits and possibilities for a healthy life in pandemic times.

Subsequently, the mediator used the interactive resource of a collaborative construction of a word cloud, so that the participants could write the meaning attributed to the experience in the VCC while they listened to the song "*Peça Felicidade*" ("Ask for Happiness"), by Gabriela and Diego Melim. At the end of this dynamics, a student read all the meanings that emerged in the interactive screen.

It is to be noted that the conversations that emerged in the VCC were transcribed and organized according to the two generating themes selected for discussion. It is emphasized that data analysis (themes) took place concomitantly to development of the VCC, with participation of all those involved, as provided for in Freire's Research Itinerary.

The research was conducted according to the ethical principles set forth in Resolution No. 466 of 2012 and was approved by the Ethics Committee, under opinion number 4,068,387, dated June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. The participants' written consent was obtained through the digital signature of the Free and Informed Consent Form, which was emailed to the participants and returned signed to the researchers. To preserve the participants' anonymity, the students were identified by the name of Brazilian writers, referring to the analogy of life and of the Research Itinerary with the book.

## RESULTS

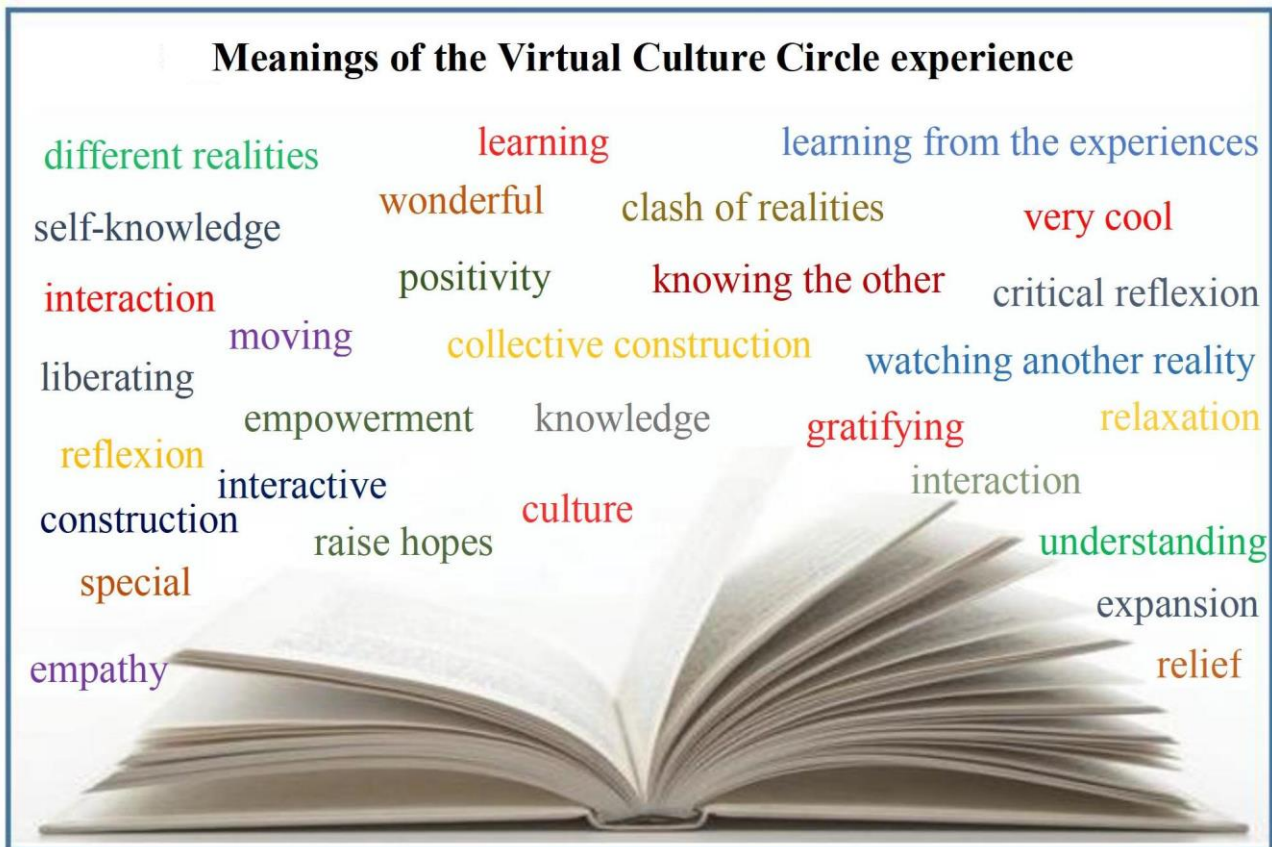
The 23 Nursing students were aged between 19 and 26 years old; 21 were female and two were male. Due to the pandemic, many students returned to their hometowns and, at that time, they were in different Brazilian cities, and most of them were living with their parents during the period of remote teaching. During the VCC, when the students talked about the repercussions of COVID-19 and the possibilities to promote health, many meanings and feelings were unveiled by the dialogical praxis (Figure 2).

1. Repercussions of COVID-19	2. Possibilities to promote your health
It was necessary to learn to live with this new moment. (Machado de Assis)	I do physical exercise to relax. (Machado de Assis)
I believe that we learned many lessons and faced many challenges; we needed to learn how to overcome the situation. (Paulo Freire)	I started praying for me and for the other people, and that helped me. I approached spirituality. (Paulo Freire)
It's a challenge because many things in life and in society changed and adaptation hasn't been easy. (Paulo Coelho)	I try not to focus on unpleasant news. (Paulo Coelho)
It's a collective construction, because every day we learn and depend on each other in this pandemic. (Mario Quintana)	I have tried to do things that were not possible before, such as reading books, watching series and studying. (Mario Quintana)
Many things changed and we had to resignify our lives. (Jorge Amado)	I took the chance to attend a language course and study. (Jorge Amado)
I had to learn to live and accept me as I am. (Guimarães Rosa)	It is necessary to be balanced not to get mad and to know the best thing to do. (Guimarães Rosa)
It awoke my self-knowledge. (Raquel de Queiroz)	I receive kindness and I try to spread it too. (Raquel de Queiroz)
It's a moment of new perspectives, of opening to the new. (Graciliano Ramos)	I think that dialog and listening are important. They relief anxiety. (Graciliano Ramos)
It's been a re-encounter with myself, with my family, and with what it's really the most important thing in life. (Monteiro Lobato)	I try to be confident that all this will come to an end and to accept the challenging events. (Monteiro Lobato)
It aroused my empathy and my concern for the others, because there are many people suffering. (Nelson Rodrigues)	Participating in the extension project helped me because I was able to do things and help the others. (Nelson Rodrigues)
It brought me reflections about life and the world. (Adélia Prado)	I do physical exercise every day to reduce my anxiety and develop patience. (Adélia Prado)
The pandemic made us miss people, going to the university, the classes, our friends. (Aluísio Azevedo)	I make video calls, I call those I miss. Thus, time passes by and I show affection to family members and friends who are far away. (Aluísio Azevedo)
Dedication is what we needed to have to move on with life. (Eva Furnari)	I've become closer to my family to lead a healthy life at home. (Eva Furnari)
I experienced resilience, because it was not possible to give up on everything. (Ruth Rocha)	I go to the countryside on the weekends to distract and to connect with nature. (Ruth Rocha)
I learned to think beyond myself. I also started a new job in this phase. (Martha Medeiros)	I try to be aware that the change needs to start in me and I'm grateful. (Martha Medeiros)
It's been a phase of rediscoveries. (Lima Barreto)	I take photographs to get distracted. (Lima Barreto)
I've kept the faith every day, believing in better days to come. (Cecília Meireles)	In the pandemic, I started to make some handicrafts and it's been very good. (Cecília Meireles)
I felt strong, it strengthened me. (Augusto Cury)	A way that I found to take care of my health was riding a bicycle. (Augusto Cury)
It was and it's been an overcoming. (Euclides da Cunha)	I started to grow plants. (Euclides da Cunha)
I had to look for a job to earn my living and, if I caught COVID, I had to accept. (José de Alencar)	We adopted a puppy at home and it has brought us much joy in this pandemic. (José de Alencar)
This pandemic brought me good things because I was able to stay at home, happy. I acknowledge all the suffering in the world, but I've been very well. (Érico Veríssimo)	I search for balance and to be in harmony with myself and with nature. I take the chance to listen to music and read books. (Érico Veríssimo)
My father caught COVID, we've suffered prejudice, and we've had difficulties in several aspects. (Clarice Lispector)	What helped me was getting involved in research and extension projects. I felt useful and productive. (Clarice Lispector)
We hardly talked to each other inside the house before. My family got a lot closer with the pandemic. (Manuel Bandeira)	I've connected more with nature and started to observe the simple things in life. (Manuel Bandeira)

**FIGURE 2:** Representation of the repercussions of COVID-19 and the possibilities to promote the students' health. Chapecó, SC, Brazil, 2020.

**Source:** Prepared by the authors, based on the conversations in the VCC.

Finally, the students reflected on the experiences in the VCC, where they could share their feelings, which brought them empowerment, relief and hope, in a process of mutual strengthening to promote their health in pandemic times. The students unveiled their enjoyment in participating in the VCC, showing that it has been a collective construction permeated by learning, empathy, critical reflection, understanding and interaction (Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3** - Meanings of the Virtual Culture Circle experience. Chapecó, SC, Brazil, 2020.  
 Source: Adapted by the authors, from <https://www1.tecnoblog.net/meiobit/2010/openbook-livro-aberto-facebook/>

## DISCUSSION

In discussions about the first generating theme, the participants pointed out challenges, lessons learned, discoveries, adaptations and resilience as repercussions of COVID-19, which brought with them the need to resignify themselves and life. The social distancing imposed by the pandemic and the restrictions in coexistence and circulation required changes in everyone's routine and, in the case of the students, interruption of classes and practical activities, as well as adaptation to new ways of studying and learning, in addition to the required adaptations in other aspects of life.

In addition to that, there were statements about the times of distress experienced during the pandemic, resulting from the extent to which COVID-19 has affected the health of the participants' families, as well as income reductions, which forced many of them to look for a job, in order to contribute to the family income. Unemployment has increased in the COVID-19 pandemic period, leading to economic losses, financial insecurity and concerns with the future impacts of this period on the country's economy. Considering that physical and mental health is influenced by this socioeconomic context, changes in these dimensions exert a direct impact on the well-being indicators, with the financial losses that negatively affect people's mental health<sup>10</sup> and directly hamper the material conditions of existence.

However, the pandemic repercussions included aspects such as greater proximity among the family members, self-knowledge and self-acceptance, which suggest a return to the participants' family group and to themselves. In addition to these elements, empathy, perceiving oneself as part of a whole in which one depends on the other, greater concern with the others and thinking beyond oneself suggest a reciprocal movement between the I and the world in which and with which the person coexists. Therefore, the adaptations to a new way of living resulting from the pandemic also evidenced the need to consider the realities of each individual, awakening empathy between people, especially towards those considered weaker<sup>11</sup>.

In this scenario, resilience capacity was required and developed, which was also one of the repercussions of the pandemic in the students' lives. Resilience is understood as a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of an adversity or challenge, which encompasses the ability to negotiate and to take advantage of psychological, social, cultural and environmental resources<sup>12</sup>. In COVID-19 times, resilience emerged in the students' dialog as a way to move on, manifesting itself in words such as learning, overcoming, dedication, opening to the new, adaptation, self-knowledge, discoveries and rediscoveries. In this sense, the pandemic offered them the opportunity to become more resilient, enabling personal transformations, and handling of various adversities and difficulties<sup>11</sup>. The process of turning to oneself enabled by the pandemic made it possible to develop resilience, stimulating reflection about oneself to understand who one is and what one wishes to be<sup>13</sup>.

Conversely, a number of studies conducted with university students in the pandemic period have shown that, in comparison to normal periods, there was a significant increase in cases of anxiety, depression and stress in this population, whose effects can be long lasting<sup>14</sup>. Thus, promoting health in this population is a necessary strategy that is encouraged by institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN)<sup>4</sup>.

With regard to the second generating theme, the students talked about different alternatives to promote their own health in the social isolation period, when close physical interactions are not possible. Among them, there were ways of self-knowledge and self-protection, such as: relaxation, enjoying simple things of life that were unnoticed before, having confidence, getting close to the family, avoiding unpleasant news, practicing dialog and listening, and contact with nature and with animals.

Another way to promote health pointed out by the participants was prayer as a strategy to resort to spirituality, understood as intrinsic to human beings, but with no mandatory relation to religiousness. Throughout the pandemic, this resource has contributed to the maintenance of hope, to resilience, to positive coping, and to the "acknowledgement of the individual and collective weakness and vulnerability, reapproaching cultures, beliefs and religion itself"<sup>15:3</sup>. It is emphasized that both spirituality and religiousness can assume an important role in personal reorganization and reinvention<sup>16</sup>.

Some leisure activities (reading, listening to music and watching movies or TV series) were pointed out as ways to face the pandemic and promote health, as well as the practice of physical exercise, which is acknowledgedly important, due to its effects on physical and mental health (cardiovascular, metabolic and immune systems)<sup>17-18</sup>. Moreover, the participants also emphasized activities that involve self-care and personal or professional growth, such as photography, handicrafts, cultivation and planting, studying another language, and participating in research and extension projects. The aspects unveiled by the students, together with the maintenance of regular routines and tasks, as well as the development of new practices and skills, emerged as healthy ways to cope with stress and to promote physical and mental well-being<sup>19</sup>.

With regard to the excess of negative news, and often fake news, shared by the media, it is known that contact with this type of information in the pandemic situation can potentiate anxiety and fear about the disease<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, in order to preserve mental health, it is recommended to avoid media sensationalism and regularly search for clarifications in reliable sources<sup>19</sup>.

The students pointed out the relevance of their participation in the VCC. These elements indicate and reinforce the importance of providing spaces where the students can talk about themselves and recognize themselves in the experiences of others, perceiving the existing differences and showing solidarity in the broadening of understanding about themselves and about the others. This shared moment contributed to awakening positive feelings and to foster hope for better days to come<sup>20</sup>.

### Study limitations

As a study limitation, there is the fact that it was restricted to a specific group of students. However, it is noted that conducting a work of this nature with large groups of people involves the risk of limiting dialog, participation and fluidity in the exchanges established. Therefore, the VCC emerges as a relevant strategy for research and health promotion, as it enables meetings and sharing of experiences, involving people who are physically distant, with the opportunity of learning and personal strengthening.

### CONCLUSION

In coping with COVID-19, the Nursing students had to overcome challenges such as prejudice, social restriction, and missing friends and family members. They found it necessary to resignify their lives, which generated self-knowledge, empathy, family union, collective construction, hope and rediscoveries.

The students pointed out possibilities to promote their health, such as: physical exercise, studying, planting, photography, making video calls to family members, dialoging, participating in extension projects, connecting with nature in search for balance, and engaging in handicrafts.

For the Nursing area, the study reveals the urgency of conducting health promotion actions during and after the pandemic period, in order to uncover feeling and announce strategies to overcome difficulties, with emphasis on the awakening of coping and resilience abilities.

It is certainly necessary, at a later time, to deepen discussions and the development of strategies that aim at promoting health among the university students and the entire population.

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