

INTEGRATIVE COMMUNITY THERAPY: ONLINE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR DEMANDS ENHANCED BY THE PANDEMIC



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ABSTRACT

Online Integrative Community Therapy (ICT) is a welcoming strategy and a space of care for the university community, offered at a time of pandemic. The objective was to understand the students' view of the ICT meetings in the teaching-learning process. This is a qualitative study, undertaken through semi-structured interviews with individuals who had attended therapy. The results were analyzed and categorized based on Bardin's content analysis. Despite not having a priori psychotherapeutic purpose, the presence of therapeutic factors in operation investigated in ICT was perceived, signaling the importance of developing psychosocial reception strategies in the pandemic context. From the material produced, it was noted that the participants reported improvements after participating in the meetings, and it was possible to identify in the universality a collaborative and solidarity network, of bonding. The study was able to identify that ICT provided opportunities to promote mental health, enabling collective learning and sharing of problems and solutions.

Keywords: Integrative and Complementary Practices, Health Promotion, Higher Education, Student.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread of the new coronavirus led to the emergence of a pandemic, infecting more than 160 million people worldwide and causing more than 3 million deaths (World Health Organization, 2021), recommending integrated strategies to prevent contagion and social restriction, so that mortality could be reduced and the impact on people's lives minimized (Pan American Health Organization, 2020).

The high rates of infection and mortality from Covid-19, uncertainties about the disease, the difficulty of predicting the duration of the pandemic, fear of contamination, social isolation, the closure of most economic and social activities, among others, were considered stressors that generate psychosocial impact resulting from the pandemic, especially in the most vulnerable populations, for example: women, students, people of non-white ethnicity, single, people without a job, at higher risk of being infected, etc. (Barbosa et al., 2021; Brunoni et al., 2021).

Studies report that online care strategies can be an effective way to provide relief to those affected and combat the psychological impact of restrictive measures (Holmes et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Taking care of psychic needs can reduce the risk of mental health problems and ensure the well-being of those affected by the pandemic, in addition, providing help amid the pandemic period and subsequent isolation conditions are possible through the use of *online* strategies (Holmes et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020). These studies have shown that information and communication technologies can be used efficiently in social support, providing positive effects in the treatment of Covid-19.

At the University of Brasília (UnB), the pandemic boosted the Health Promotion and Prevention Working Group, which had as one of its priorities the establishment of partnerships to enable psychosocial support in actions to combat Covid-19, in order to produce social care technologies and create products in technical cooperation, with *online activities*. Among the various actions was the online Integrative Community Therapy (ICT), an emotional care practice that promoted mental health care for the entire university community, through a partnership with professionals from the State Department of Health of the Federal District (SES/DF).

ICT is an approach to community health care, created by Prof. Dr. Adalberto Barreto, understood as a group practice that encourages the expression of life experiences, enabling the joys and difficulties experienced in daily life to be shared, as well as the strategies for overcoming them that have been developed (Barreto, 2013). It is a practice

recognized by the National Policy for Integrative and Complementary Practices (Ministry of Health, 2018).

It was originally created for face-to-face reception in a group format, commonly called a circle. However, due to the confinement necessary due to the pandemic period, the format and structure required adaptations in the proposal of emotional support and care for people, one of them being the change from face-to-face meetings to an *online* format, in order to continue contributing to health promotion and prevention, however, with minimal physical contact between participants and, consequently, hindering the spread of Covid-19.

In this sense, for the development of online ICT at UnB, it was based on the guiding document called "Guidelines for carrying out On-line Integrative Community Therapy", prepared by the Brazilian Association of Integrative Community Therapy (ABRATECOM), however, based on a collective, intersectoral, interdisciplinary and interinstitutional articulation construction involving various social actors with the purpose of promoting interventions of emotional support and strengthening of the social support network, as well as preventing the effects on mental health related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Silva et al. (2020), online ICT was implemented as a challenge; to use a hard technological means, such as the cell phone or computer (hard technology), mediated by the construction of a protocol (soft-hard technology), to be used as a soft technology intervention with the objective of welcoming, empathetic listening, the establishment of bonds, and the exchange and sharing of experiences in the pandemic context. This integrative practice is shown to be an effective strategy in preventing and coping with emotional imbalances caused by the new coronavirus pandemic (Pontes; Saints; Netherlands, 2021).

The online ICT was implemented at UnB to be able to support the mental health of the university community during the pandemic period. An *online* space for collective care through welcoming and listening. Considering that the study was developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, this article aimed to understand the students' view of ICT meetings in the teaching-learning process.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a broad Action Research (P-A) entitled "Effectiveness of psychosocial e-therapies in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic". The study complied with all ethical aspects involving research with human beings, as recommended by Resolution

No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council, and was initiated after approval by the National Research Ethics Committee (CONEP) and the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the State University of Santa Cruz (UESC), under Opinion number 4.063.178 and CAAE 31567220.5.1001.5526.

The main objective of P-A is to approach problems in practice with the anticipation of finding immediate answers to questions or solutions to problem situations. It appropriates methods and techniques of data collection from social research, to shed light on the process of conducting the practitioner in the form of action research, including benefits and applications to facilitate applied research in contextualized and practical settings, conducted by practitioners who are focused on solving practical problems (Mertler, 2021).

The study was conducted by the Working Group on Health Promotion and Prevention at UnB, with the participation of 12 people, eight professionals and researchers in the area of health promotion from different categories (psychology, occupational therapy, nursing, psychoanalysis and philosophy), and four students from undergraduate courses at UnB, in partnership with UESC, in order to develop mental health promotion and prevention actions for the academic and external community, from August 2020 to August 2021, totaling 90 ICT circles. The research included the four *campuses* of UnB: Darcy Ribeiro Campus; Faculty of Ceilândia; Gama College; and Planaltina College.

130 people participated in the activities, including 128 undergraduate and graduate students from UnB, 1 nursing technician from the university and 1 student from UnB Idiomas (the university's language schools). Registration for TCI *online* was carried out through a *link*, made available on UnB's official social networks, by filling out a form through *Google Forms*. When accessing the initial page of the research, the participants had the Free and Informed Consent Form (ICF) available for reading, with the appropriate explanations about the study. The ICF was signed virtually through a mandatory icon of the type I agree or do not agree. The inclusion criterion was to accept to participate in the research and to be over 18 years old.

The conduction and organization of the online ICT were carried out by UnB professors and SES/DF employees, who assisted in the implementation of this care proposal with meetings accessible through the virtual platform *Zoom*, weekly and lasting approximately two hours, for the entire academic community, due to the accessibility that the virtual universe made possible.

The online ICT was developed following the methodology established by psychiatrist Adalberto governed by: "systemic thinking, communication theory, cultural anthropology, Paulo Freire's pedagogy and resilience" (Pontes; Saints; Holanda, 2021), respecting the five stages of the method: "welcoming, choice of theme for sharing, contextualization, problematization, closure with rituals of aggregation and appreciation" (Barreto, 2013).

During the meetings, the participants were informed that they would have to develop a task on ICT and were reminded that the activity was voluntary. Participants were asked to express their feelings about the effect of online ICT on their lives in times of Covid-19, through expressive activity.

Expressive activity is a significant tool of the basic language of the psyche, creative and self-generating in itself that gives them specific form, meaning and dynamism (Jung, 1991) and at the same time collaborates to unlock communication about experiences with ICT enables the intertwining of thoughts and emotions, an important material to achieve the objective of the research.

The more than 100 expressive activities were collected during the months of September, October and November 2021, and all participants carried out the activities. To avoid the bias of social desirability, the studies were randomly selected, and no correlation was made between the participants' responses. All participants signed the ICF.

The data were analyzed under the reference of content analysis (Bardin, 2011), whose emphasis is, through systematic and objective procedures, to break down the text into units, in indicators formed from the investigation of the main themes that emerge in the discourse, which allow the inference of information and knowledge.

The Content Analysis research technique advocated by Bardin (2011) is structured in three phases: 1) pre-analysis; 2) exploration of the material, categorization and coding; 3) treatment of results, inferences and interpretation. For the author, the validity of the research findings is the result of an internal and systematic coherence between these phases, whose rigor in the organization of the investigation inhibits ambiguities and constitutes a founding premise.

Pre-analysis is the organization that involves the "floating" reading of Bardin (2011), that is, a first contact with the documents that will be submitted for analysis, their choice, the formulation of hypotheses and objectives, the elaboration of indicators that will guide the interpretation and the formal preparation of the material. In the exploration of the material, the coding units were chosen, adopting the following coding procedures, which include the

choice of registration units – clipping; the selection of counting rules – enumeration; and the choice of categories – classification and aggregation –, rubrics or classes that bring together a group of elements (registration units) due to common characteristics, classification and categorization (Bardin, 2011). Also according to the author, the last step is inference and interpretation, when the researcher seeks to make them meaningful and valid. Beyond the manifest content of the documents, therefore, what is important is the latent content, the meaning that lies behind what is immediately apprehended.

The content analysis was chosen because it keeps the participant's message as the focus. At the beginning of the data, the drawings were analyzed and independently reviewed, and the initial impressions of each image were noted. The focal points of the expressive activities, such as situations, people, objects, and feelings, were sought and noted (Halpenny, 2021).

In view of the above, based on the interpretation of the data and for a better description of the results, the following thematic analysis categories were listed: a) Online ICT, a space for care in the midst of the pandemic; and b) Self-knowledge and the process of self-healing in online ICT.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the ICT Circles developed at the University throughout 2020 to 2021, in relation to the characterization of the participants, it stands out that 94% of the students were in the age group of 23 to 28 years; 88% with female identification and 12% male, there was no reference to any other form of identification. Regarding race/ethnicity, 68% of the students declared themselves brown, 12% black and 20% white.

05 materials from students who participated in TCI were selected. The analysis of the material revealed two categories: online ICT, a space for care in the midst of the pandemic; Self. The objective of this stage is to return to the theoretical references and support the analyses by giving meaning to the interpretations (Bardin, 2011). The analysis of the main themes brought by the students; at first, themes that were present in ICTs, such as online ICT, *a space for care and in the midst of the pandemic and self-knowledge*.

CATEGORY 1: ICT *ONLINE*, A SPACE OF CARE AND IN THE MIDST OF THE PANDEMIC

As it relates to online ICT meetings as a space of care, the results indicated how much less lonely participants felt when sharing personal experiences with others that they may be ashamed of or reluctant to reveal. The exercise of self-disclosure of personal experiences and feelings in a support group setting can be effective in reducing symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, producing well-being of the participants (Gonsalves et al., 2023).

Exploring the peculiar phenomenon of online ICT during the pandemic, participants represented these experiences with letters, poems, drawings, and symbols. Silveira (2001) states that artistic productions bring a therapeutic value in themselves. These artistic representations produced reflection on the difficulty of isolation and the need to protect oneself generated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

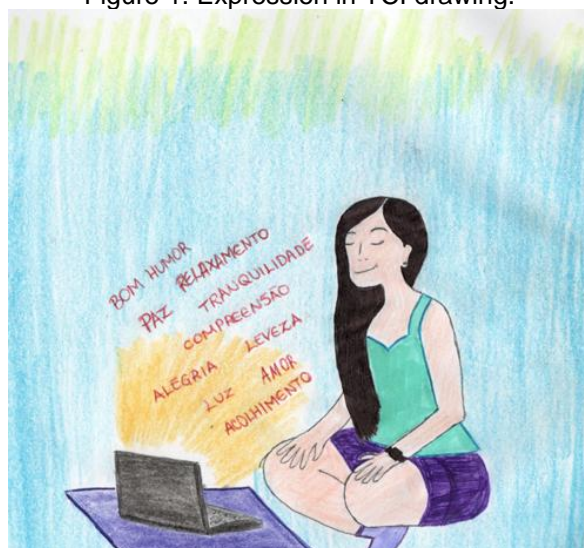
TCI became routine and online meetings served as a kind of company with other people during the difficult period of quarantine and social distancing, giving a sense of normality in the daily lives of the members and a space for care, according to the text written by the participant:

Community Therapy brought me the energy I needed to move forward, it showed me that I am not an abnormal person, that there are several people who also go through the same difficulties as me, and do not give up on living. The sharing of different feelings and emotions each week made the therapy circle even more attractive and precious, giving me the certainty that the best thing to relieve the tensions of the body and mind was to put out all that feeling of anguish and receive in return an indescribable welcome, with words of comfort and support (Participant 1).

The above statement expresses that the empathy presented in ICT promotes the breaking of the isolation of the university student and helps him to create new meanings for the feelings that take over him in the university context. Yalom and Leszcz (2009) state that the groups are a powerful source of relief, since, after hearing other members reveal concerns similar to their own, they start to feel more in touch with the world.

Participant 2, on the other hand, expresses, through drawing (Figure 1), the process experienced with the body, acquiring another awareness of dealing with the body, a transformation in the look, in a different way of seeing and feeling, which was also portrayed as lightness, welcoming, tranquility and love. Quoting Ciornai (2020), something new emerges from the moment we share, as we have the possibility of getting in touch with perceptions. This new experience ends up translating into a new way of living life.

Figure 1. Expression in TCI drawing.



Source: Survey data.

For Pereira and Barbosa (2016), the act of drawing contributes to the reduction of uncomfortable symptoms and can collaborate in the student's discoveries and decisions. To the same extent, ICT allows interaction, Juliano and Yunes (2014) highlight that interaction based on exchanges, mainly affective, enables the development of a diversity of roles, changes in actions and contributes to balance.

For other participants, online ICT is consolidated as a safe, welcoming and health-promoting space, as demonstrated by participant 3, when expressing his experience with ICT with the following report:

My experience with the discipline was extremely enriching, I feel that I was able to learn, help, participate, understand, reflect, not judge, share, have more empathy for myself and for people. At the time we are in the pandemic, it was possible to realize the importance of the discipline and how much it served as an escape valve for many students who are facing difficulties in these moments of uncertainty. This initiative is very important to help us in this process of self-knowledge and strengthening our mental health. [...] There was a day that marked me a lot, which was when I heard an outburst, a report from a colleague, I identified a lot with her speech about worrying too much about the opinion of others... That day I read a phrase that I believe was marked by some, many praised it... The phrase became a kind of mantra for me... I will always carry with me this teaching of healing through speech, "speech that heals". (Participant 3).

In this participant's report, ICT is a space for speech that heals, Fochesatto (2011) says that through speech, people are given the opportunity to connect with ideas. Thus, he comes to have a new understanding of this memory. The reception of ICT as the bearer of its uniqueness aims to make the person listen to its speech. ICT enables the work of people who participate in ICT to hear what is said, favoring "healing".

It is perceived that online ICT enabled new ways of dealing with the suffering caused by the pandemic, the results showed an effective form of interaction between the therapist and participants, which transformed contact into welcoming. The act of summoning to speak is the basic principle for group welcoming. Online ICT, during the pandemic period, became a resource for monitoring people, a collective that fostered connections that favored the management of suffering through a support network, due to the impact of confinement, such as loneliness, fear, anxiety, physical and symbolic losses, feelings of powerlessness, and frustration (Silva et al., 2022).

Corroborating Crispim et al. (2020) and Souza et al. (2021), *online services* have been possible alternatives to act in the different scenarios of the pandemic, both in prevention and in health promotion and recovery, as they allow approximation and communication during times of social restrictions, since this format overcomes geographical borders, being one of the ways to alleviate fear and anxiety in facing the pandemic.

3.2 CATEGORY 2: SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-HEALING PROCESS IN ONLINE ICT

Involvement with ICT allowed participants to have contacts with joyful affects, which increase the power of existing, reduce social isolation, increase communication and positive social experience, even in the face of the pandemic. Good interpersonal relationships and bonds and involvement in the community are key factors to improve satisfaction with life, so that it is possible to overcome the difficulties and challenges that arise along the way through resilience and self-knowledge, thus culminating in one's own solutions. (Souza et al., 2021). Participant 4 wrote a letter of gratitude to the circle, considering it as a friend who made new paths possible:

Hello, dear friend.

I come through this letter to express what it was like to participate in a project called community therapy. My dear friend, one of the best things I learned in therapy was the word I. When talking about a feeling, an event, a situation or anything, we should all talk about ourselves and always include the word I, not talk about us, us, everyone thinks like that, but argue about yourself. At first, I thought that this was selfishness, what do you mean, thinking about yourself, always talking about yourself. Something that I thought was selfishness, is actually a challenge. Talking about yourself is difficult, something I haven't learned along my journey... [...] Friend, you know, I have difficulties in my life, suffering and problems that I face daily, before, I thought I was alone, my problems would be mine alone, no one goes through what I go through, but the thing is not like that, when following the therapy, I realized that what I am not alone, the difficulties I go through, other people go through the same, There are similar problems, there are sufferings similar to mine, but it's serious, understanding this took time, understanding that my pains and sufferings are not only mine, other people are going through the same thing I go through. All this showed me that I can overcome, since I am not alone. I don't want to take up too much of your time, I hope that with these few words you have understood how my participation in the last few months has changed what I feel

about my own life and about myself. "I", a word I learned to use and understood its meaning. I don't like to talk about myself very much, then I learned that I can talk about myself, it's not selfishness, in fact it's a help I need. Thank you for reading my letter. (Participant 4).

The act of writing offers a space for reflection on what was experienced during ICT. When writing the letter, the student has the opportunity to reflect, thank and think about his actions. It organizes its ideas and becomes as if it were the extension of ICT. Studies have found that feelings of gratitude increase resilience, physical health, and quality of daily life (Natividade, 2019). For Komase et al. (2021), gratitude helps people respond more positively to life events and value situations in which others are benevolent towards them, providing resources for psychological well-being.

TCI *online* consolidates itself as a safe and liberating space, as demonstrated by participant 5, when he expressed his experience by drawing a rereading of the work Gaiola de Gala (Figure 2), a surrealist painting "The Therapist", created by René Magritte in 1937. In this participant's report, ICT is a space of support, of reducing suffering, favoring emotional strengthening.

This rereading has a very important meaning, as it brings in its essence the figure of a man with the body of a cage. Where this cage signifies a place of imprisonment, the brain within it signifies the imprisonment of thought, the feeling of incomprehension and loneliness.

During the Integrative Community Therapy circles, each session helped me to find the key to open this "prison" where I could see that I am not alone, that there are people who go through difficulties and who can help me through listening, and it could help me to recognize mainly that the protagonist of this freedom is myself, Only I can open the lock that closes this cage, but I need to understand that I need to free myself from all the anguish and recognize that there are people who can help me get to the lock, but only I can open and get rid of it. (Participant 5).

Figure 2. Rereading of the work Gaiola de Gala.

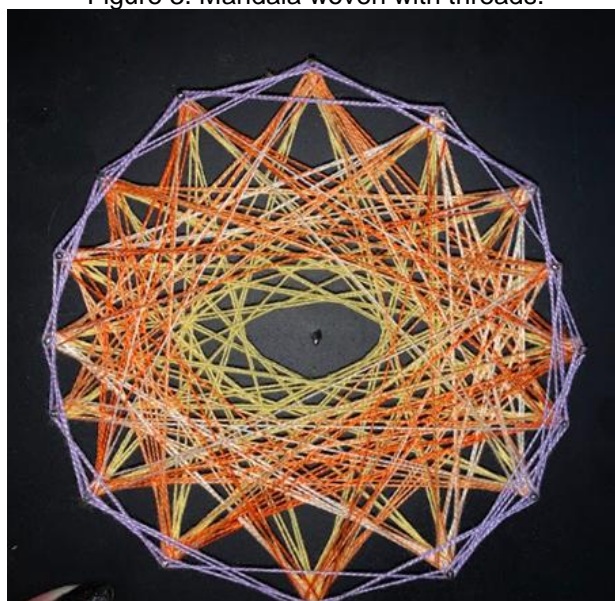


Source: Survey data.

Barreto (2013) sheds light on the meanings of getting sick, of the body responding and of the techniques of speaking to continue in the art of healing, highlighting the reflection: "when the mouth is silent, the body speaks". Giving voice to pain, to suffering, is important for maintaining health, to share the solutions that each one finds to deal with life's obstacles, but also to reaffirm a space for listening, the right to be heard (Lima-Ticha, 2020). Regarding the self-healing process, the participant demonstrates through doing that it can be relaxing, because doing something with one's own hands raises self-esteem, which refers to care.

The notion of care was also reported in the experience of the TCI loom, which refers to happiness and appears as an expressive activity, which orders, organizes and expresses feelings related to emotions (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mandala woven with threads.



Source: Survey data.

Philippini (2021) states that, in the art therapy process, weaving is equivalent to ordering, integrating, relating, organizing, appropriating the creative and existential flow, creating its own support. For the aforementioned author, "the creativity inherent to the human being took care of transforming the need for survival into experience and artistic expression"³¹ (p. 66). And care becomes present.

The act of weaving referred to learning about oneself, the connection of cognition, hands and emotions. According to Leloup (2021, p.124), "there is a link between the hands and the brain, when, for example, we pray a rosary, when we have them engaged in

manual work, when we have something between our hands, our mental, our psyche, calms down".

The online ICT sessions held with the university community were strategies that had demonstrated effectiveness, as they facilitated involvement in meaningful and satisfactory group activities (Smith; Lim, 2020). However, ICT is not a psychotherapeutic group. In short, the word is welcoming, which is transformed, continuously reconstructing the participants' perception of themselves and the other. This process took place at a time when the only tool available was *online*, a challenge for a rich construction of sharing experiences and practice of mental health promotion care, a fundamental strategy to open a space for connection to face the difficulties imposed in the period of confinement resulting from the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This study found that, in the face of an event with the magnitude of the Covid-19 pandemic, the realization of the online ICT offered at UnB by the multidisciplinary team served as a strategy to promote well-being and psychosocial support, enabling a wide reach and maintaining the characteristics of face-to-face meetings, such as: welcoming, creation and strengthening of solidarity social networks, through the sharing of experiences, a space for reflection on health and care promotion, and a chance to build strategies to cope with the pandemic context.

Despite the interesting findings of this study, there are some limitations that should be noted. On the part of the authors, there was no influence as to the exact methods used to carry out the expressive activities. In the event that the authors had been present for the activities, additional questions would have been asked to the participants and the longer answers would have been recorded to obtain additional context on the meanings attributed to ICT.

Although ICT has been shown to be effective psychosocial support, it should not be taken as the only option, especially for cases that require specialized care, such as cases of depression, anxiety disorder, among others. It is recommended that other studies can be complementary, so that these strategies are increasingly better used and that more evidence can be found on the efficacy of ICT.

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