

# Mental Health of University Teachers During COVID-19 Confinement. Systematic Review\*

## La Salud Mental de Docentes Universitarios Durante el Confinamiento por COVID 19. Revisión Sistemática

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### Abstract

The objective was to document the mental health of university teachers during COVID-19 confinement through a systematic review of studies published in the databases Pubmed, Ebsco, Scielo, Redalyc, and Google Scholar between January 2020 and April 2023. The keywords used were mental health, COVID-19, university professors, and qualitative, in English and Spanish. A total of 244 records were located, of which 12 articles were included. High and very high levels of stress, anxiety, distress, and depression were found, mainly in teachers older than 45 years and women, as well as medium levels of resilience. The main causes were lack of experience with technology, difficulty in reconciling family and work, increased working hours and changes in teaching methodology, economic instability, and fear of losing their jobs. It is concluded that the mental health of the teachers was seriously affected by the confinement and the change in the work modality.

**Keywords:** Mental health, confinement, Covid 19, teachers, systematic review

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## Resumen

El objetivo fue documentar la salud mental de los docentes universitarios durante el confinamiento por COVID 19. Se realizó una revisión de alcance de estudios publicados en las bases de datos: Pubmed, Ebsco, Scielo, Redalyc y Google Académico, entre enero de 2020 y abril de 2023. Se utilizaron las palabras clave salud mental, Covid 19, profesores universitarios, cualitativo, en inglés y en español. Se ubicaron 244 registros, de los cuales se incluyeron 12 artículos. Se encontraron niveles altos y muy altos de estrés, ansiedad, angustia y depresión, principalmente en docentes mayores de 45 años y mujeres, así como niveles medios de resiliencia. Las principales causas fueron la falta de experiencia con la tecnología, la dificultad para conciliar la dupla familia - trabajo, aumento de horas de trabajo y cambios en la metodología de enseñanza e inestabilidad económica y temor de perder el empleo. Se concluye que la salud mental de los docentes se vio seriamente afectada a causa del confinamiento y del cambio en la modalidad de trabajo.

**Palabras clave:** Salud mental, confinamiento, Covid 19, docentes, revisión sistemática

## 1. Introducción

The emotional requirements associated with teaching work, such as a constant state of alertness, implicit and explicit mental demands, physical exhaustion, excessive workload, competitive environment, as well as low salaries, job dissatisfaction, and lack of recognition, have been related to mental health problems (Baiao and Cunha, 2013; Guevara and Domínguez, 2011). Likewise, the logic of academic production, efficiency, scientific writing rates, and research projects with fundraising and administration increase competitiveness (Mancebo, 2007; Oliveira and Freitas, 2008). University teaching work is intense and multifaceted, with permanent demands for attention to well-differentiated fronts between teaching, extension work, and research, which affect the balance of personal and work time (Rapaso, 2006). Among the main stressors derived from teaching work are work stress, demotivation, and disinterest of students (Rubio-González et al., 2019).

The pandemic required a sudden change in the work routines of university teachers, who, in a short period, had to adjust the work modality, methodology, forms of evaluation, and the content of the subjects so that they could be offered online, which required the acquisition of skills related to the use of technologies in addition to work and social interaction through computer screens, which could lead to adverse effects on the mental, physical, emotional and family health of teachers.

Depending on individual characteristics, family context, and workspace, for some teachers, confinement enhanced creativity and allowed the development of new skills as well as increased productivity and use of time (García & Gambarte, 2019); in others, on the contrary, it caused mental health problems (Wang, 2020), isolation, depression and loneliness (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2020) and stress due to the adaptation to working in a small space, not suitable for classes, exposed to environmental interruptions (Salazar, 2016).

Due to gender issues, in the case of women, in addition to the adaptive demands of work, responsibility for tasks derived from family care and household chores also increased, which impacted the management of free time and blurred the dividing line between personal time and work time (Vela et al., 2020; Cladellas-Pros, Castelló-Tarrida and Parrado-Romero, 2018).

Since the confinement period was longer than projected and, for reasons of biological safety, universities called for full in-person work until January 2022, university communities adapted to remote work. When relative comfort had been achieved in this work modality, occupational stress was again generated derived from the return to in-person work. The habituation to the comfort of home developed in many teachers, especially the older ones, the hermit syndrome, and the return turned out to be mentally demanding, both for teachers and for students, especially at the university level.

Due to their nature, university teachers can experience a process of silent suffering that can be aggravated by feelings of guilt and self-demand when trying to manage time, tasks, people, and crises, which can cause exhaustion (Legal, 2008). Considering the importance of the role of the teacher in the professional development of students, establishing themselves as a link between students and society, it is important to evaluate mental health.

This review aimed to document the mental health of university teachers during the COVID-19 lockdown through

a systematic review of publications between January 2020 and August 2023.

## 2. Methodology

A scoping review of qualitative studies was conducted with the aim of exploring publications related to teachers' mental health and identifying key topics (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Four steps were followed: (a) Identification of the research question, (b) Selection of publications, (c) Data analysis, and (d) Summary and communication of results. The PRISMA checklist (Page et al. 2021) was considered for identification. Publications were tracked in the following databases: Pubmed, Ebsco, Scielo, Redalyc, and Google Scholar. The search was conducted from April 1 to May 1, 2023.

The search technique consisted of tracking scientific articles published between January 2020 and June 2023 in English and Spanish, carried out in Latin America and the United States, using the search equation:

**“TITLE-ABS-KEY((Mental health AND Covid 19) OR (Mental health AND “pandemic) AND (university professors) AND (qualitative)) AND PUBYEAR > 2020 AND PUBYEAR < 2023”.**

The eligibility path consisted of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, and in each of them, the reasons for exclusion were explained. The following were considered as inclusion criteria: (a) Research articles on the mental health of university professors during the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) Articles with a qualitative approach, (c) Written in English and Spanish,

(d) Published between January 2020 and June 2023. The following were excluded: (a) Case reports, (b) Theoretical articles or textbooks, (c) Articles that included student populations, (d) Articles that included teachers from levels other than higher education, (e) Works to obtain academic degrees.

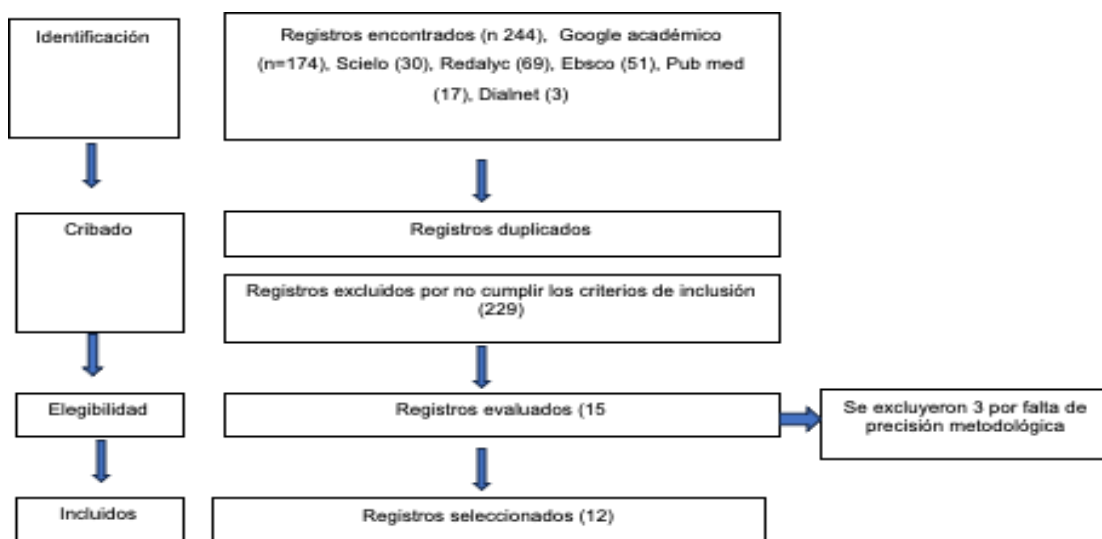
a) In the identification phase, the inclusion criteria were applied to the titles of the publications returned by the databases, using the dates and search equation as filters. Duplicates in the different databases were eliminated.

b) In the screening phase, the abstracts of the identified articles were reviewed, and those that did not meet the inclusion criteria were discarded.

c) In the eligibility and inclusion phases, the full text of the selected articles was read, and decisions were made about their relevance and inclusion (See graph 1).

To use the search equations, a total of 244 records were obtained, of which 177 correspond to research papers for obtaining university degrees at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels; 39 addressed problems related to education and new ways of teaching in the context of confinement; 4 articles addressed populations other than university students; 2 articles simultaneously included student populations that were not discriminated against in the analysis; 2 articles were related to beliefs limiting the use of technology; 7 correspond to systematic reviews and 1 to textbooks. Fifteen articles were evaluated, and three were eliminated due to needing more methodological precision. Twelve records were selected for the review. The information obtained from reading the articles was organized into two types of analysis. In the first, the findings were grouped according to the common topics found, and in the second, thematic content analysis was carried out (Sauza & Minayo, 1995) for which the information was categorized and coded using the qualitative data analysis program Atlas ti (2022).

Graph 1. Selection process of articles based on the PRISMA Guide



### 3. Results

Each of the included articles was read in-depth, and relevant information was synthesized in an analytical matrix. (See Figure 2).

Graph 2. Studies included by year

Year	Authors	Type of Study	Sample	Central Topics	Conclusions
2020 Chile	Jorquera, R., & Herrera, F. (2020). Salud mental en funcionarios de una universidad chilena: desafíos en el contexto de la COVID-19. <i>Revista Digital de Investigación en Docencia Universitaria</i> , 14(2).	Quantitative, Non-experimental, Cross-sectional, and Correlational	192 academic and non-academic staff from a public university	Psychological health: Depression, anxiety, and stress	80% had yet to gain experience in online classes. An increase in working hours and connectivity problems were observed. Demand to balance family and work
2020 Peru	Casimiro, W. H., Casimiro, C. N., Barbachán, E.A., & Casimiro, J. F. (2020). Stress, Anguish, Anxiety and Resilience of University Teachers in the Face of Covid-19. <i>Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana</i> , 25(7), 453-464. <a href="https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4009790">https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4009790</a>	Descriptive study	university teachers	Job burnout: burnout	Stress levels in women
2020 Chile	Ramos-Huenteo, V., García-Vásquez, H., Olea-González, C., Lobos-Peña, K., & Sáez-Delgado, F. (2020). Percepción docente respecto al trabajo pedagógico durante la COVID-19. <i>CienciAmérica</i> , 9(2), 334-353.	Qualitative approach, semi-structured interview	10 secondary education teachers	Perceived workload: work overload	High levels of stress in 89.4% of stress, 94.2% of anguish, 92.3% of anxiety. 60.9% of resilience
2021 Brazil	Wagner, T.F., Heck, C., Dalboso, S.N.P., de Oliveira, C.R., & M.F. (2021). Ansiedade social e comorbidades em professores do ensino superior. <i>Revista Psicologia e Saúde</i> , 13(4), 3-13.	Descriptive, descriptive, correlational, cross-sectional study	50 higher education teachers	Socio demographic and work variables	Identified emotions: grief, anguish, and stress.



2021 Brazil	Abreu, R. N. D. C., Eleres, F. B., Magalhães, F. J., Rolim, K. M. C., Cestari, V. R. F., & Moreira, T. M. (2021). O Professor Em Tempos De Pandemia: Emoções E Sentimentos Do Enfermeiro-Professor. <i>Enfermagem em Foco</i> , 12(6).	Descriptive, qualitative study	21 nursing degree teachers	Emotional state in the face of COVID-19: Stress, anguish, anxiety, resilience	Job demands and requirements: teaching + management position
2021 Brazil	Raimondi, G. A. (2021). Between Applauses and loneliness, heroes/warriors and fear: thoughts of a medical professor during the COVID-19 pandemic. <i>Qualitative Inquiry</i> , 27(6), 738-739.	Qualitative: Performative poetry, auto ethnographic	1 doctor, professor, researcher	Perception of their practice, teaching-learning process, mental health of teachers, support for teachers	Teachers reported a lack of psychological support during this period
2022 Ecuador	Noroña, D. R., (2022). Autopercepción de la salud laboral en docentes del Instituto Superior Tecnológico Sucre. <i>ECA Sinergia</i> , 13(1), 80-92. <a href="https://doi.org/10.33936/eca_sinergia.v13i1.3831">https://doi.org/10.33936/eca_sinergia.v13i1.3831</a>	Mixed sequential derivative study	Quanti: 106 teachers	Socio demographic data, social anxiety, individual anxiety, stress, depression	2% of teachers presented moderate or extreme symptoms of depression.
2022 Mexico	Quijada Lovatón, K. Y., & Gómez-Nashiki, A. (2022). Resiliencia: convergencia de emociones y experiencias docentes en la educación a distancia en tiempos de la COVID-19. <i>Sinéctica, Revista Electrónica de Educación</i> , (59), . <a href="https://doi.org/10.31391/S2007-7033(2022)0059-008">https://doi.org/10.31391/S2007-7033(2022)0059-008</a>	Quantitative: Non-experimental, cross-sectional, descriptive design and correlation of variables	Qual: 2 focus interviews 25 people per group	Emotions feelings experienced by confinement or social isolation in teaching	Assertive expressions of discomfort, displeasure, or boredom were identified
2022 Colombia	Atará-Piraquive, A. P., Rute Sanabria, B. O., & Cantor-Cutiva, L. C. (2022). Productivity costs associated to voice symptoms, low sleep quality, and stress among college professors during homeworking in times of COVID-19 Pandemic. <i>Revista de investigación e innovación en ciencias de la salud</i> , 4(1), 4-15.	Qualitative: Focal interview with purposeful sampling, with a theoretical foundation of social constructionism, direct observation with free lists	20 basic education teachers from 8 states of the Mexican Republic	Thoughts on education, health, medical research, and experiences during the pandemic	Representations of emotions: Fear, being worried, feeling tired, hope, and faith

2022 Ireland, Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, Luxembourg, USA, Scotland, Spain	Geraghty, S., Oliver, K., & Wang, C. C. (2022). Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic for midwifery and nursing academics. <i>British Journal of Midwifery</i> , 30(10), 546-553.	Online and telephone interviews, analysis with grounded theory	58 university professors	General Health	Reflection of ambivalences: On the one hand, health professionals are heroes and recognized; on the other, they are forgotten and attacked
2022 Brazil	Grillo, M. B., Marinot, J. B., Brito, S. S. C., Grillo, C. H. B., & Szpilman, A. R. M. (2022). As implicações da pandemia de COVID-19 na saúde mental e física dos professores do curso de Medicina de uma universidade da região metropolitana do Espírito Santo, Brasil. <i>Revista Brasileira de Pesquisa em Saúde/ Brazilian Journal of Health Research</i> , 24(2), 15-24.	Descriptive, cross-sectional study.	91 nursing and midwifery academics who spoke English	Group resilience: support networks, management actions of directors and teachers due to technological habituation and attention to administrative demands, and strategies to maintain communication.	39 teachers presented disturbances in their mental health
2023 United States	Smith, C., Menon, D., Wierzbicki, A., & Dauer, J. (2023). Teaching Assistant Responses to COVID-19. <i>Journal of College Science Teaching</i> , 52(3)	Calculation of the reduction in productivity due to the	98 medical teachers	Individual resilience: emotional containment strategies, rapid adaptation development, support with empathy and solidarity actions, creative actions in rural and urban areas	Twenty-five people reported high exposure due to teleworking, problems reconciling work-family, increased emotional exhaustion due to long hours, and social dysfunction.

Common topics found were symptomatology, sequelae due to emotional disturbance, and positive response actions.

## The topic of symptomatology

The studies reported very high levels of stress (Casimiro, 2020; Jorquera & Herrera, 2020; Wagner, Heck & Dalbosco, 2022; Atará-Piraquive, Rute & Cantor-Cutiva, 2022, Ramos-Huenteo, García-Vásquez, Olea-González, Lobos-Peña & Sáez-Delgado, 2020; Avalos & Trujillo, 2021; Smith, Menon, Wierzbicki & Dauer, 2023; Palafox, & Domínguez, 2021); Very high levels of anxiety and distress symptoms (Casimiro, 2020; Wagner, 2022; Noroña, 2021; Abreu, Eleres, Magalhães, Rolim, Cestari & Moreira, 2021; Jorquera & Herrera, 2020; Grillo, Marinot, Brito, Grillo, & Szpilman, 2022) and extremely severe levels of depression (Wagner, Heck & Dalbosco, 2022; Prada, Gamboa & Hernández, 2021; Noroña, 2021; Grillo, Marinot, Brito, Grillo, & Szpilman, 2022) mostly in teachers over 45 years of age and women.

## The topic of sequelae of emotional disturbance

In the process of teachers' adaptation to confinement, consequences were found in the emotional state considered as warning indicators, which could lead to psychological repercussions that require specialized attention, such as Loneliness (Geraghty, Oliver, Chunfeng, 2022; Raimondi, 2020); Fear and fright (Raimondi, 2020; Abreu, Eleres, Magalhães, Rolim, Cestari & Moreira, 2021); Uncertainty (Ramos-Huenteo, García-Vásquez, Olea-González, Lobos-Peña & Sáez-Delgado, 2020) and persistent worry (Ramos-Huenteo, García-Vásquez, Olea-González, Lobos-Peña & Sáez-Delgado, 2020; Abreu, Eleres, Magalhães, Rolim, Cestari & Moreira, 2021).

## Topic positive response actions

Regarding protective factors, medium levels of resilience were described, associated with a good attitude toward overcoming adversity (Román, 2020), especially in women, related to the perception of emotional support and changes implemented in lifestyle during confinement. It was also found that academic stress coping styles helped to manage moments of tension (Avalos & Trujillo, 2021), empathy (Quijada & Gómez, 2022), commitment (Quijada & Gómez, 2022), and creativity (Quijada & Gómez, 2022), social support (Avalos & Trujillo, 2021) are actions that are observed to accompany the response to face the demands of readaptations of working conditions in teachers. Thematic Content Analysis

The thematic content analysis consists of organizing the patterns identified in the texts in an orderly manner for a second-order interpretation. Two thematic axes were proposed: 1. Causes of alterations in mental health and 2. Lessons learned, each with its corresponding codes, are presented in Graph 3.

Graph 3. Analysis of thematic content by categories and codes

Thematic Axes	Categories	Codes
Causes of Changes in Mental Health	Extra-work context	Family and work in the same space
		Overlap between work and personal life
		Economic uncertainty
	Working conditions	Uncomfortable spaces Increased working hours Lack of tools and technology



Thematic Axes	Categories	Codes
	Job instability	Poorer working conditions
		Fear of unemployment
		Job dissatisfaction
		Hiring for service provision
<b>Causes of Changes in Mental Health</b>	Teaching tasks	Changes in teaching
		Lack of previous experience
	Gender disparity in responsibilities	Gender-differentiated stress
		Greater deterioration of mental health in women Multiple female roles Weight of responsibility for home and parenting
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	Learning at work	Formalization of flexible academic processes
		Social support and teamwork strategies
		Standardization of processes
	Learning for work	Coping training Tolerance to frustration Balancing the family-work relationship Priority to family coexistence Sharing available resources

### 3.1 Thematic Axis: Causes of Mental Health Disorders Extra-work context

Studies agree that the first cause of stress is the simultaneous confluence of family and work, which requires the adaptation of two roles that until then had been promoted as incompatible. Before the pandemic, most jobs recommended “separating family from work” in order to perform better, which generated great confusion. Not having a clear time limit altered both work and family tasks, requiring workers to make decisions hastily, considering the possible alternatives according to their reality, to resolve the urgent needs of each day. Due to the pandemic, many jobs were lost, increasing the psychological pressure of responsibility among workers who kept their jobs, such as university professors.

#### Working conditions

In terms of working conditions, teachers had to adapt their home spaces to the needs of silence and isolation, which also involved the participation of other family members. Initially, due to a lack of experience working from home, it took much work to reconcile the time dedicated to work, which extended the workdays from early in the morning until late at night. Since interconnectivity gave the idea of immediacy, it was assumed in work dynamics that changing from one task to another only required a couple of minutes and that workers were always available within reach of a click, overloading the workday.

Lack of knowledge of how to use technology, lack of updated equipment, and the failure of the Internet network due to natural inconveniences were also additional sources of stress.

### **Job instability**

Higher education institutions were not immune to the economic uncertainty associated with the pandemic. On the one hand, thousands of students dropped out of school due to a lack of resources, technology, access to internet services, and loss of their families' income. On the other hand, virtual classrooms allowed the number of students to double or triple. Hence, some universities kept their full-time professors and reduced their workload or fired their teachers for temporary services, generating widespread fear in the profession due to the loss of job stability and unemployment, especially among those with unstable contractual conditions. Consequently, teachers who remained linked overexerted themselves by increasing their activities to reduce the risk of being fired; likewise, isolation stopped research projects with funding and, therefore, the flow of resources, increasing uncertainty.

### **The teaching task**

Both the interaction with students and colleagues, as well as the dynamics of face-to-face classes, changed drastically with isolation. The contents of the classes were adapted to be offered virtually; teachers had to develop new exercises, rethink programming, and create

new ways of teaching and evaluating, an action that was more challenging in some subjects than in others, as is the case of practical classes, which had a special impact on health science faculties.

However, more was needed. These exercises were tested with the students, and so much effort only sometimes gave good results since, at the time of executing the class exercises, they could not be carried out due to difficulties in understanding or performing the requested task; the control of the teachers was lost when each student had different technological needs and skills.

In this aspect, variables such as age and seniority had a great effect; many older teachers did not know how to adjust to the change and ended up quitting their jobs, while young teachers adapted because they were more familiar with technology. In contrast, more experienced teachers performed better in their oral explanations than younger teachers.

### **Disparity in responsibilities by gender**

The pandemic highlighted the disparity in the allocation of family responsibilities between the genders, with women being the ones who had to take on household chores, care, upbringing, and feeding unequally. In all cases, the studies described higher levels of mental health problems in women, as well as better responses to the environment and greater resilience.

### 3.2 Thematic Axis: Lessons Learned

#### At work

Among the lessons learned for work is the simplification and standardization of both administrative and academic processes that favored the participation of teachers and students. Processes such as meetings, registrations, payments, hiring, downloading documents, and digitalization of signatures, which before the pandemic required human and time resources, were simplified to be self-manageable.

Institutions made academic processes more flexible, which allowed the international online mobility of teachers and students, which allowed networking with professionals from other institutions located at great distances; in this way, technology became widespread and became an inherent part of teaching today.

#### For work

Prolonged and sustained exposure to a stressful situation developed positive response skills in teachers, such as resilience and coping, as well as the ability to balance time spent on work, family, and personal life. They developed a high tolerance for frustration and for sharing available resources, both technological and service-related, with their family and work community.

### 4. Discussion

Mental health disorders were found due to social isolation, which varied between countries, being higher in Latin America (Liu, 2020; Ipsos, 2020; Johnson, 2020), which is assumed that in addition to the population having to adapt to a new space to work, not everyone had the same resources to teach their classes (Quijada & Gómez, 2022); However, everyone was equally required to achieve the same result. Therefore, teachers experienced a series of concerns about wanting to give their best and maintain the same level of what they had in face-to-face classes, even in conditions of disadvantage with each other, which had an impact on labor justice. Ostau de Lafont de León, F. R., & Niño Chavarro, L. Ángela. (2015).

Although biological safety was given priority, psychological complications were gaining prominence throughout the academic community because both teachers (Ma, Liang, Chutiyami, Nicoll, Khaerundin, & Ha, 2022) and students presented similar symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Cáseres-González, Budian, González-Rojas, Britez-Silvero, & Ferrari, 2023).

Regarding the emotional states related to attitudes and feelings in response to a stimulus in the social environment that can be positive or negative (Bisquera, 2001; Geraci, Di Domenico, Inguglia & D'Amico, 2023; Cobo-Molina

et al., 2019) and, therefore, it was necessary to use all their technological and personal resources to be able to adapt to a new way of living and coexisting. In addition to the type of support provided by the institution, bosses or coworkers (Quijada & Gómez, 2022), highlighting that collaboration and openness to adapt to new ways of communicating (López, 2015) was fundamental in addition to making a difference in facing confinement due to the pandemic.

It is worth noting that there are particularities in the experiences of teachers to point out the causes and the way of facing moments of tension, as well as the effects it had on their mental health, and that, of course, it is difficult to compare them with developed countries. The period of confinement will remain in the memory and, with it, the reflection of adjusting the priorities of personal life, highlighting that there is something beyond work.

Educational institutions must design post-pandemic psychological care protocols for the entire academic community. In the case of teachers, their mental health must be assessed, mainly to rule out unresolved grief processes, the absence of post-traumatic stress and reduce psychosomatic effects (Noroña, 2022; Atara-Piraquive, Rute & Cantor-Cutiva, 2022) generated by physical, mental or emotional demands. Moreover, on an individual basis, appropriate treatment should be considered to strengthen positive coping strategies (Avalos & Trujillo, 2021) to be prepared for any emergency.

## 5. Conclusions

Mental health changes were found in teachers due to social isolation, which varied between countries and was higher in Latin America. The need to maintain the same level of quality of work as in-person classes, even in disadvantaged conditions, had an impact on labor justice and required using both technological and personal resources to adapt to a new way of living and coexisting.

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