



Impact of COVID Lockdown in Spain & Latin America

| By Andrea Lardani and Elena Sánchez Escobar

The COVID-19 pandemic has demanded that employee assistance professionals deal with abrupt changes in the workplace, differences that may include the experiencing and managing of new emotions. What is the psychological impact of a worldwide lockdown on workers? How are they coping with remote work? What do they need from their employers? Are there differences between Spanish and Latin-American responses?

Our organizations collected and analyzed 693 questionnaires to answer these very questions. This article will present key results analysis as well as discuss how EAPs are responding to this unprecedented time. One point is clear: EAPs need to show companies that well-being policies are more important than ever.

Survey and Participants

The survey was designed and implemented in April 2020 by Yees in Spain and in Latin-American countries by Grupo Wellness Latina in September 2020. We used an online questionnaire that included 15 open and closed questions. We obtained quantitative and qualitative data from participants between 18 and 65 years of age. Open questions allowed participants to express their thoughts freely. Clinical teams in Spain and Argentina – fifteen persons – analyzed answers.

Emotions

Different emotions and feelings were experienced during lockdowns in Spain and Latin America.

In Spain, respondents indicated a parity of conflicting emotions. That is, the simultaneous coexistence of apparently contradictory emotions, such as *anxiety* and *calmness*, or optimism and sadness. At almost 40%, calmness was the most frequently mentioned emotion. The imposition of telework and “stay at home” to avoid contagion implies an emotional reaction of security, which is tarnished, however, by strong *anxiety* (33.5 %) when returning to the office.

Essential workers indicated high level of *anxiety* (38% in this group) due to their level of exposure, and yet they reported being very *optimistic* (30%) about the future. Permanent exposure to risk may increase sense of control and optimism towards being able to change the situation.

No statistically significant differences were found regarding gender. Considering age, we have been able to verify how *calmness increases with age*, which is also true in Latin America. In Spain, 27% of the participants between 18 and 30 reported feeling *calm* compared to 67% reported by those over 65. In Latin America 60% of this last age group reported feeling *calm* during lockdown.

According to Gooding, Hurst, Johnson & Tarrier (2012) adults are more resilient in *emotional* regulation and problem solving while young people are more skilled in recovering *with social support*. The youngest age group (18-30) reported less difficulty in identifying and naming their emotions in both Spain and Latin America.

Latin-American respondents – from Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru – reported predominantly experiencing *anxiety* (46%) and *stress* (39%). Anxiety was higher in individuals between 18 and 30 (67%), which may be related to uncertainty about their future and less experience in coping with crisis as opposed to the over 65 age group, who reported predominantly feeling *calm*.

Conversely, nearly half (48%) of respondents ages 31-45 felt overwhelmed by *stress*. This age group is likely to be coping with additional family demands, such as helping their children with classes, taking care of toddlers, and even supporting elder parents.

Anxiety is higher in teleworkers (54%) than in essential workers and employees who are in their usual work environments. This might be related to uncertainty about returning to their usual workplaces

and greater difficulties in work/life balances when working from home.

Managers and directors reported more optimism (40%) and less fear (5%) than other workers. This may be useful in designing well-being plans with managers taking the lead in teaching other groups how to cope with adversity with optimism.

Conversely, fear was highest in essential workers (25%), which may be due to the level of adapting they've had to do to protect themselves from the risk of contracting the coronavirus.

Latin-American respondents reported experiencing less sadness and fear than in Spain (15 and 12% versus 30 and 24% respectively). This may be because COVID-19 arrived and spread later in Latin America, so sadness related to losses and fear toward re-opening are still not significant. On the other hand, anxiety and stress are higher in Latin America than in Spain (see Table 1).

Table 1: Most frequent emotions during lockdown in Spain and Latin America.

Emotions	Spain 455 respondents	Latin America 238 respondents
Calmness	40%*	29%
Anxiety	33%	46%**
Sadness	30%	15%
Stress	29%	39%
Optimism	27%	28%
Fear	24%	12%
Anger	12%	11%
Loneliness	11%	13%
Don't know how to express them	10%	7%

* Most frequent in Spain

** Most frequent in Latin America

Examples of phrases shared by respondents:

"I have contradictory sensations, although there are days I feel overwhelmed, I also feel it was good to reduce speed." (Spain)

"I feel uncertain and I have some fears about possible consequences, but I also feel optimistic and responsible for staying home." (Spain)

"I am concerned about my elderly relatives' health and guaranteeing my family the necessary resources." (Latin America)

"I feel overwhelmed having to work, take care of the children, help them with school, housework, everything at the same time." (Latin America)

Work and Coping Strategies During Times of Crisis

What areas in life were most affected during lockdown? We asked participants which of the following aspects impacted them the most: a) keeping pace with work, b) exercise, c) sleep, d) time management, e) balanced diet, f) relationship with friends and family and g) other.

Table 2: Most difficult areas to manage during lockdown in Spain and Latin America.

Most difficult to manage	Spain 455 respondents	Latin America 238 respondents
Keeping pace with work	45%*	29%
Exercise	40%	45%**
Sleep	33%	25%
Time management	32%	41%
Balanced diet	23%	18%
Relationship with friends & family	23%	23%
Other	2%	4%

* Most difficult for Spain

** Most difficult for Latin America

Difficulty *keep pacing with work* was the highest for respondents in **Spain** with *exercising* in second place. The lockdown has not reduced job demands; the same levels of performance are expected, and family lives may have higher demands with children at home. This stressful situation combined with reduction in physical exercise may enhance *sleeping* difficulties.

In **Latin America** *exercising* (45%) was the most frequent difficulty mentioned, closely followed by *time management* (41%). Lockdown, with closure of gyms and sports, has significantly reduced options for

physical exercise in spite of its necessary for mental and physical health.

The abrupt reduction of physical activity combined with the difficult challenge of balancing work, family demands, and increased housework may well explain the high levels of anxiety and stress mentioned by Latin-American respondents.

In spite of the obstacles, 66% of participants in Spain and 76% in Latin America perceive themselves managing lockdown positively. This demonstrates how human beings from different continents react with resiliency towards this world pandemic. Some textual phrases expressed by participants:

“I feel hopeful that all this will end.”

“I try to stay calm and keep going.”

“I feel tired but grateful that my family is healthy and that I have a job.”

“I try to value simple things, I miss hugs.”

“I live one day at a time, trying not to break the routine both at home and at work, connecting with nature and looking for pleasant family activities that allow us to cope with lockdown.”

How are EAPs Responding?

Telephonic assistance and digitalization of services were already present before the pandemic. COVID-19 has done nothing more – nor less – than to increase visibility of the value of having an EAP as a preventive and assistance tool.

In Spain, the number of calls *decreased* at the beginning of the pandemic to our surprise. We realized that employees did not have an intimate place at home to talk about their problems. Therefore, we launched e-mail counseling, which had not been implemented in Spain before, and it was very well received, increasing utilization.

For return-to-work offices, Yeas created the *Welcome Back Program* with self-care guidelines for employees and managers that included recommendations and an activities calendar. This program, along with emotional support, was the most requested EAP service.

At Grupo Wellness Latina in Latin America, online and telephonic psychological utilization increased 45% compared with the same quarter in 2019 (July, August, and September). Consultations related to anxiety, stress, fears and work-life balance during home office were the most frequent complaints.

For the first time, we are receiving calls from employees’ *parents*, who are an at-risk group because

of their age (older than 65). They present issues such as loneliness, sadness, and fears related to COVID-19. *As a result, we had to recruit more affiliate psychologists to respond to this increased and specific demand.* We also incorporated new webinars with specific tools to support employees and their family members during the pandemic. Utilization of these webinars and our well-being platform have increased during lockdown.

One company client in Argentina had half (50%) of its employees infected with COVID-19. Human Resources asked their EAP provider if psychologists could call each of these employees, find out how they are doing, inform them about the EAP, and offer counselling sessions.

Another company in Mexico asked their EAP to coordinate focus groups for employees to discuss possible work changes after lockdown and how to cope with them. *These are new and atypical requests that were provoked by this pandemic.*

Summary

EAPs need to be flexible and adapt to the new reality of COVID-19. We need to listen not only to the decision makers in our client companies, but also to end users. We should be aware that mental health symptoms may have late onset (six months after the end of lockdown). Training in emotional self-knowledge (*“Which are my emotions? How may I regulate them? When should I ask for help and where?”*) will help workers identify signs of potential risk and take responsibility for their vigilance and self-care.

Expanding services to provide broader health care coverage may be a path worth exploring. Musculoskeletal disorders, eating disorders, and substance abuse may have increased during lockdown as well as after re-opening. Stress can be reflected in muscle tension or related illnesses such as headaches. There is also evidence about the relationship between anxiety, anguish, stress, and substance abuse (Alexander, 2012). The pandemic has also increased the risk toward different addictions such as drugs, video games, internet and food (Rojas-Jara, C. 2020).

In Latin America, both before and during COVID-19 lockdown, companies began requesting EAPs to include other services as nutritional consultations, ergonomic professional advice, online stretching classes, and specific hotline assistance for gender violence. Gender violence, including femicides, has increased due to lockdown (Lardani, 2020).

In Spain and in many Latin American countries, mental health assistance remains a stigma, but the pandemic crisis has accelerated this shift in paradigm. Organizations are now placing emotional care and mental health of employees as a greater priority.

Yees has developed a program that is supporting 10,000 workers of an important insurance group. The program includes a complete assessment of needs, psychological assistance, emotional debriefing groups for workers on the front line, grief support groups for workers who have lost family members due to the pandemic, training in coping skills, and a strong communication campaign to help strengthen the sense of belonging (minimizing the impact of emotional burnout).

All told, there is no question the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for EA professionals, employees, and employers alike. But the crisis has also brought to light a number of opportunities for EAPs, some of which are presented in this article. *The keys lie in being flexible, adaptable, and taking advantage of these possibilities when they arise!* ❖

Andrea Lardani is the Director at Grupo Wellness Latina. She has extensive experience in developing and managing EAPs and well-being programs for multinational companies, as well as in training and leading affiliate networks and teams in Latin America. She may be reached at andreal@grupowellnesslatina.com.

Elena Sánchez Escobar is Clinical & Operation Director at Yees. She has over 12 years' experience in global healthcare, wellness and EAP operations, and account management. She may be reached at elena.sanchez@yees.es.

References

- Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Louise, •, Smith, E., Woodland, L., Prof, •, Wessely, S., Prof, F. •, & Greenberg, N. (s. f.). EL IMPACTO PSICOLÓGICO DE LA CUARENTENA Y CÓMO REDUCIRLA: REVISIÓN RÁPIDA DE LA EVIDENCIA. Recuperado 13 de noviembre de 2020, de <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/piiS0140-6736>.
- Rojas-Jara, C. (2020). Cuarentena, aislamiento forzado y uso de drogas. Cuadernos de Neuropsicología/Panamerican *Journal of Neuropsychology*, 14(1), 24-28. <https://doi.org/10.7714/CNPS/14.1.203>.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227-237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352>.
- Facultad de Psicología de la Universidad de la República (2020). Cuidado comunitario Subtítulo Frente al Coronavirus COVID-19. <https://psico.edu.uy/covid/cuidadocomunitario>

OPS/OMS (2020). Consideraciones psicosociales y de salud mental durante el brote de COVID-19. <https://www.paho.org/es/documentos/consideracionespsicosociales-salud-mental-durante-brote-covid-19>.

Gooding, P.A., Hurst, A., Johnson, J. & Tarrier, N. (2012). Psychological resilience in young and older adults. *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 27(3), 262-270.

Alexander, B. K. (2012). Addiction: the urgent need for a paradigm shift. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 47, 1475-1482. <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826084.2012.705681>.

Lardani, A. (2020). How Covid-19, gender violence and femicide intersect in Latin America. *Journal of Employee Assistance*, 50(3), 18-21.

Advertise in

The Journal of **Employee Assistance**

Contact Cindy Chao,
Development Manager:

(303) 242-2046, development@eapassn.org

LOOKING FOR A SAP?

SAPlist.com
the best way to find Substance Abuse Professionals

Current info
on SAPs...
It's easy...
It's free!

Questions? Lee Mauk
612-827-4147
Lee@saplist.com