

Athens, 11 April 2020

Subject: “PANDEMENTal Project”: Mental health support associated with the recent COVID-19 outbreak for European citizens

Dear members of the AEPEA,

We are writing to inform you about a new initiative launched by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service of the First Psychiatric Department of the University of Athens.

The spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has become unstoppable, having reached the epidemiological criteria to be declared a pandemic. On March 31st United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, launched a new plan to counter the potentially devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The new report, "Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19", describes the speed and scale of the outbreak, as well as the disruption caused. A coordinated global response to prepare health systems to meet this unprecedented challenge is imperative. Growing evidence shows that the capacities of the European health systems are being intensely challenged. We expect that disproportionate pressure is placed not only on services dealing with physical illness, but also on the mental health sector of the systems most severely hit by the outbreak. In times of social distress caused by any reason, early recognition of mental health problems is expected to reduce the burden of disease, particularly for the most vulnerable.

A crisis such as this places pressure on all building blocks of health systems. Novel diseases need novel reactions. New forms of solidarity and philanthropy should be considered. In an interconnected world, health systems seeing their capacities challenged may find support in systems experiencing less pressure. Greece is currently in a relatively favorable position, when compared to other countries in terms of cases and deaths caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus. With 1,955 confirmed cases until April 9th, the country is ranked 50th in the list of the countries with confirmed SARS-CoV-2 virus cases (Johns Hopkins Center for Systems Science and Engineering, <https://systems.jhu.edu/research/public-health/ncov/>). According to United Nations Secretary-General we are only as strong as the weakest health system. Taking it a step

further, we could argue that based on our technological achievements and driven by a new sense of global solidarity we may all become as strong as all our health systems together.

Responding to this new idea of global solidarity the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service of the First Psychiatric Department of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens is launching the project “PANDEMENTal”. The project is targeting children, adolescents and their families in Europe, who are experiencing mental health difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and/or its containment measures. Today we start by offering our guidelines translated to foreign citizens living in Greece, as well as our assistance and guidance in case of a child and adolescent psychiatric emergency in their families. Your citizens may direct their worries or questions to our online mental health line (pandemental.project@gmail.com) and we will contact them through an online message or a telephone appointment. At the same time we are making our online mental health service (pandemental.project@gmail.com) available to all people living in the European countries, most severely hit by the outbreak: Spain, Italy, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium, Switzerland, Netherlands (Johns Hopkins Center for Systems Science and Engineering, <https://systems.jhu.edu/research/public-health/ncov/>). Our services are offered in English, French, German and Italian.

Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,

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Εθνικόν και Καποδιστριακόν
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COVID-19 outbreak: Guidelines for children and families

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Since early March countries around the world are confronted with an unprecedented crisis, primarily affecting health and rapidly spreading to all levels of social fabric; education, work, leisure, individual freedoms and personal choices. Various national and international organizations, including the World Health Organization, have already issued guidelines for the protection of mental health for the general population. Regarding children and adolescents, we have developed the following set of guidelines trying to shed some light on the special needs and developmental challenges of the pediatric population.

- Protect children and adolescents from overexposure to news, images and information about the COVID-19 pandemic. Discuss reliability and safety issues of information sources with older teens and advise them to seek information from sources you trust. Avoid direct exposure of younger children to news coverage.
- However, inform children and adolescents in a concise way about the actual events. Trying to make the crisis a "secret" shared among adults may have complex implications. Children have already realized the profound changes that occur in everyday life and adults need to interpret the facts for them, so as not to leave the task of interpretation exclusively in the field of children's imagination. Complex concepts and the sequence of events resulting in the restriction of their freedom need to be explained in a simple and understandable language.
- Provide adequate and age-appropriate stimuli, while constantly and actively encouraging play activities. Help children develop their creativity and manage their free time. Try to find and offer children some educational activities, without however being stressed about how to substitute the entire school curriculum. It is impossible!
- Help children find effective ways to express their feelings, like anxiety or fear. Sometimes play or painting may enable this process. Children feel

relieved when they express and share their feelings in a safe and protected environment. Offer children a perspective, explaining that epidemics have a beginning and an end.

- Try to create a new daily routine for children for as long as they are out of school. Maintaining a program with steady hours for wake-up, lunch, leisure and bedtime helps children adjust to new conditions.
- Make sure that children have a balanced diet, good sleep hygiene and at least the minimum daily necessary physical activity, depending on their age. It is recommended that children avoid eating large amounts of sugar and ready meals, ensure direct exposure to the sun for a while, and moderate to vigorous physical exercise for 60 minutes three times a week, according to World Health Organization guidelines.
- Help the child to maintain the network of social relationships through alternative ways of communication, for example through telephone call, social media, teleconferencing, etc.
- Try to find opportunities to offer children positive and optimistic messages from your community, for instance talking about people who have recovered or helped someone who was ill. We instill in children feelings of respect, gratitude and trust in health professionals who care for patients with COVID-19.
- Make sure that children stay close to their families and parents, if this is considered safe. Avoid separating children from their primary caregivers. If this is absolutely necessary, make sure that children take proper care while separated from their parents and have regular communication with their parents, e.g. through telephone with the parent twice a day, etc.
- During stressful times, children may become more attached to their parents and/or more demanding. If your children have concerns, talking to them will alleviate their anxiety. Children observe adults' behaviors and emotions, in order to draw conclusions about how to manage their own emotions at critical times.
- If your child shows intense reactions and/or behavioral difficulties, contact a child and adolescent mental health specialist by phone and report your concerns.
- For children with developmental difficulties receiving intervention, it is recommended to contact the child's therapist.
- Protect your health. Children need a healthy adult to take care of them. At the same time, parental care for personal health will serve as a role model for children showing them how to defend their own health.