

Mood Disorders In Teleworking In The Context Of Covid-19

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Teleworking (TW) is a type of work established in the '70s in the United States due to the oil crisis. Chile has applied it legally since 2001, showing a 31% increase in its use since 2009 and up to 72% as of March 2020, due to the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent decrease in social and workplace exposure suggested by health authorities to prevent contagion.

Although TW was already used in exceptional cases of the 45-hour workweek, in 2020, 72% of companies nationwide have teleworkers. It should be noted that in 2006, the leading technology companies reflected only 25% of the use of this form of work despite having this category, according to the Chilean Association of Information Technology Companies (ACTI).

The objective of this research is to determine whether TW develops mood disorders in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The review of articles and research related to teleworking with and without a pandemic context was used as the methodology for this paper.

Among the results obtained, the decrease in physical fatigue caused by commuting to work and more contact with family members were highlighted. However, this could be related to greater health and safety problems due to reduced office space, noise, insufficient healthy breaks,

poor ergonomics, quality and mastery of technology, available connectivity, and the ambiguity of working or doing housework. In conclusion, telework deserves greater attention, interest, and contribution of studies of mood changes that may manifest during its execution; even more so under the context of a pandemic and the sum of social, academic, and family changes experienced concurrently by teleworkers.

Keywords: *Telework, mood disorders, covid-19 pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

Compared to the results obtained in June 2019, teleworking in Chile has increased more than 100% as of March 2020 — just as Chile was entering phase 4 of the Covid-19 expansion, which led to strict sanitary measures. One of the measures that caused the greatest social impact was physical isolation based on staying at home, which led companies that had Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which allowed them to conduct work activities virtually according to the definition of the International Labor Organization (ILO), to use telework.

However, it is not enough to address the usual changes that may occur when a face-to-face worker becomes a teleworker, but also to evaluate mood changes that may manifest themselves within the context of the pandemic in terms of the prolonged isolation at the social, work, and academic level of all family members and its emotional impact on the teleworker.

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DEVELOPMENT

Definitions and use of telework in Chile

Teleworking emerged in the 70s as a result of the oil crisis in the United States. It was created by the physicist Jack Nilles, who is considered the Father of Teleworking for developing the following concept: “Teleworking is the possibility of sending work to the worker, instead of sending the worker to work”¹. In this way, Nilles contributed to the development and improvement of society; however, the usefulness of this idea was considered years later.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) — to which Chile belongs since 1912 with 62 conventions, 51 of which are still in force² — defines teleworks as follows:

a) activity that is conducted in a location far from a central office or production facilities, separating the worker from personal contact with work colleagues who are in that office.

b) way of organizing and conducting remote work with the assistance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) at the worker’s home or in places or establishments that do not belong to the employer, facilitating communication with technological support according to their needs³.

In Chile, teleworking was recognized for the first time through the ruling of Law No. 19.759 in 2001, which incorporates it as a case of exception to the maximum duration of the ordinary 45-hours work week enshrined in article 22, paragraph 1 of the *Labor Code* (= *CdT*)⁴. However, though this was a choice for employees, it did not contemplate limits on call hours from their employers. That is why, on March 24, 2020, a law that regulates telework, with the “right to disconnection,”

which frees employees from responding to requests from their employer for a period of 12 hours, was published in Chile⁵.

Although it is true that telework in Chile has been legally recognized since 2001, it was already in use in previous years. According to the report of the National Institute of Statistics (INE) of the Chilean labor department, a survey from 1997 to 2000 revealed an increase in home-working in the Metropolitan region, obtaining an increase in the main activities of workers, as well as activities by sex⁶. Even though this increase had been taking place over the years, the Chilean Association of Information Technology Companies (ACTI) showed in 2006 that only 25% of the companies that make up said association used teleworking, a figure considered very low for leading technological companies⁷.

After the confirmation of the first case of Covid-19 in southern Chile on March 3, 2020, and the announcement of phase 4, the global HR and employment services consultancy Randstad Chile announced the use of teleworking in 72% of the companies surveyed, an increase in comparison to 31% obtained in June 2019. However, in both studies, the modalities of technological use were similar⁸. Likewise, the General Manager of the Cisco subsidiary, Gabriel Calgaro, mentioned that, in the second week of March 2020, 30,000 meetings with 60,000 connected users took place, and 24 hours later, it reached 37,000 meetings with 87,500 participants⁸.

This increase in modality led to 52% of the employees reporting fear of losing their job in addition to feeling anxious and stressed. The application Workie Talkie conducted a survey between June 1-7, 2020, to 1560 teleworkers in the context of the pandemic, asking questions such as, “How do you feel?”, which showed the following results 18.6 % acknowledged feeling stressed; 11.2% anxious; and 9.7% frustrated. Another 8.1% admitted feeling

depressed, and 7.3% angry⁹.

The pandemic has generated changes in the habits of family members; in this context, it is necessary to know more about mood disorders and mood changes that may occur in order to identify, anticipate, and stop the development of the symptoms that may generate in the teleworker.

What are mood disorders?

The set of mood disturbances among which depression, mania, and mixed states stand out are known as thymic disorders or mood disorders¹⁰. There are biological studies of heredity, biochemical aspects, the role of catecholamines, hormonal and psychosocial factors, and premorbid personality factors as etiological causes of mood disorders¹¹. Anxiety disorders also affect mood¹². Stress contributes to neuroendocrine, immunological, emotional, and behavioral processes and responses to situations that imply a demand for adaptation greater than usual for the body and/or are perceived by the individual as a threat or danger, either for their biological or psychological well-being. The threat can be objective or subjective, as well as acute or chronic. In the case of psychological stress, what is crucial is the cognitive component of the subject's appreciation of the situation¹³.

Furthermore, numerous epidemiological studies have confirmed Kraepelin's observation that stressful events are more frequent before the first depressive episode. In the case of personality types, there is a greater predisposition to mood swings such as depression in dependent, obsessive-compulsive or hysterical personalities¹¹. This is also confirmed by the Director of the Postgraduate School in Severe Personality Disorders of the University of Valparaíso, Roberto Castillo, in an interview conducted by telephone. However, the articles found in relation to teleworking before and during the Covid-19 pandemic are not directed

towards the study of mood disorders but rather to what is discussed next.

In accordance to the study published in May 2020 by the journal of *Sustainability* "about telework in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic", it was concluded that telework should be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a simple absence from the office to which the majority of public and private organizations have resorted without precedent. Therefore, it can be considered that the call to telework is forced by the circumstances of the spread of Covid-19; in this context, the company forces employees to adopt teleworking as a way to continue their employment relationship, as it was evidenced that no company had contingency plans specifically designed to resolve emergency situations such as the current pandemic¹⁴.

Its authors, Standen, Daniels, and Lamond, cite nine benefits of TW provided by Warren in 1987, such as autonomy for decision-making, opportunity to develop skills, freedom to fulfill responsibilities, obtain goals, and choose ideal conditions for the development of TW. They note that while Warren provides a sound basis for studies of TW at home, the well-being of each and their relationship to each other has not yet been examined in detail.

Additionally, they cite that work and family life are clearly more susceptible to intrusions when they are conducted in the same place, causing a cognitive or emotional disconnection. The findings of this study concluded that the teleworkers present more emotional changes than office workers, which invites stress management to be directed at teleworkers rather than office workers¹⁵.

On the other hand, in 2019, the Journal of Happiness Studies evaluated the subjective well-being of teleworkers, found that telework reduces mobilization fatigue but increases stress for both men and women due to the pressure to perform

and meet the expectations of the employer and their own expectations, so this review suggests that the benefits of teleworking for employees be reconsidered, and, that to improve the quality of life, the government or employers should provide more support to homeworkers, such as childcare, parenting the elderly, physical support such as enough space to work, and a social network that can support homework practices. These supports would enable home-based workers to better deal with loneliness, stress, and conflict between work and family, and would help them develop boundaries in time and space between the worlds of home and work to maintain higher levels of self-motivation. It also asks to regulate long working hours to promote an adequate balance between work and life, thus maintaining a harmonious family relationship¹⁶. It was also revealed that people who perform telework and deal with work-home conflict and role ambiguity at home negatively influence the intention to continue teleworking among teleworkers¹⁷.

The Journal of Applied Psychology, in 2007, published a meta-analysis where they reviewed published studies from magazines, book articles, and also unpublished studies in the areas of administration, psychology, education, sociology, and engineering, and they evaluated the good, the bad, and the unknown of teleworking. In this study, they found that the teleworking contributes to positive effects due to a perception of autonomy, which was favorable for the teleworker's performance, in addition to showing reduction of stress and resignations¹⁸.

Human capital consultants of Fundación Chile, in their Engagement and Teleworking survey in Covid-19 context based on a simple random sample in the form of an open and freely shared survey of people who were teleworking, surveyed 522 people and measured work engagement and burnout. These results were compared

with benchmark results from Chile 2019.

The engagement results obtained showed a decrease of 0.714% for vigor, 0.35% for dedication, and 0.28% for absorption. These three measures showed higher percentages in the questions "When I get up in the morning, do I feel like working?", "Am I proud of the work I do?" and "When I am working, do I lose track of time?"

Exhaustion increased by 0.145% from 2019 to 2020, which is greater than the benchmark in 2019. Extreme state of wear reached 21% vs 28% in 2020. Among the benefits, the results indicated that the time that was previously used for commuting is now used for more time with the family; among the difficulties, an increase in chores at home was revealed.

When asked, "Do you feel that it has negatively affected you in any of the following areas?", multiple choice answers revealed results of 54% for the ability to concentrate, 45% for distress and loneliness, and 43% for mental health. Regarding home space where the TW is conducted, the survey showed that 36% use the dining room, 24% the study room, 15% the living room, while 11% use the bedroom and 10% improvise a room.

The conclusion in this survey shows an alarming low level of engagement and a high level of exhaustion, compared to the benchmarks in 2019¹⁹.

CONCLUSIONS

Although it is true that we still do not have studies performed under the approach of mood changes with teleworking, it is essential to highlight that in the current context, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the circumstances of the use of TW are not the same as in previous years.

The pandemic offers us a different view, as not only is the teleworker at home, but also all the other family members, which

requires more technological equipment and better internet connection services.

Teleworking parents that are with school-aged children who need their support for their tele-education demand the use of workhours to render that help, which causes self-abuse as it extends work hours, thus neglecting adequate, necessary, and healthy work breaks.

It is also important to consider the impact that can be generated at the mental health level of each individual by the restriction of outings, trips and social interaction that were used to counteract stress.

Let us remember that, currently, this work modality was not chosen but rather imposed by health authorities in order to avoid the spread of Covid-19 in the face of a health emergency experienced worldwide.

Clearly, these measures were necessary, but they deserve greater vigilance and research, mostly due to the prolonged isolation that this implied in teleworkers. Therefore, I suggest researching and learning more about this subject to confirm or rule out that this context causes mood disorders. I also suggest researching whether the patient has a prior history of mood changes and/or presents low or no capacity for adaptive flexibility based on their personality type

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