

Abstract citation ID: ckad160.1705
'But we survived': Older adults' strategies to cope with the lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background:

Older adults are one of the most vulnerable groups to severe illness associated with the SARS-COV-2 virus. Therefore, it would be expected that the elderly would suffer great impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental health. However, it seems not to be the case, possibly due to contextual aspects and the strategies used by them to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study aimed at exploring the strategies older adults in Portugal deployed during the mandatory lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 to protect their mental health.

Methods:

A total of 22 older adults were interviewed and included in this study (36% women; age range between 66 and 92 years old). Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews between Jan-Sept 2020 and analysed according to codebook thematic analysis.

Results:

Three main themes were identified. The first theme - 'finding things to do and activities that can protect me' - referred to behavioural coping strategies adopted to deal with the pandemic (e.g., preventing behaviours to avoid COVID-19 infection, social support). The second theme - 'identifying how my thoughts can protect me' - encompassed cognitive coping strategies, such as engaging in meaning-making processes to

make sense out of the circumstances. Finally, the third theme - 'counting myself lucky: me and my home advantages' - included aspects perceived as beneficial to the wellbeing of participants during lockdowns (e.g., being healthy, living in a rural area).

Conclusions:

The thematic strategies identified by older adults to manage the pandemic and lockdown-related stresses could be linked to meaning-centred coping and could be further developed via existential therapy.

Key messages:

- As older adults with health problems and living in urban areas may be at a disadvantage when facing lockdowns, they should be identified by government health entities and forward to psychologists.
- The efficacy of preventing behaviours to avoid COVID-19 dissemination, distraction, social support, and meaning-making processes during health hazards should be targeted by treatment programmes.