## **ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Disability and integral community health: a contribution of La Uniandes

Discapacidad y salud comunitaria integral: una contribución de La Uniandes

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#### **ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** the attention to disabled people in the field of health constitutes one of the current priorities of society. International organizations have highlighted its relevance and the need to implement actions that contribute to it in integral community health, to which the Universidad Regional Autónoma de Los Andes has been incorporated.

**Objective:** to develop alternative therapies to mitigate stress levels in caregivers of the Peral 1 and 2 centers in the municipality of Ambato, Ecuador.

**Methods:** analytical-synthetic and inductive-deductive methods were used, as well as a bibliographic review and a survey.

**Results:** the frequency of stress symptoms in caregivers of disabled people in the Peral 1 and 2 centers for disabled people in the municipality of Ambato was determined; the diagnosis of the level of knowledge of alternative therapies of aromatherapy, music therapy and relaxation techniques in them; as well as a proposal for training workshops about these therapies and their implementation.

**Conclusions:** caregivers of people with disabilities are subjected to a high degree of stress as a result of the frequency and intensity of their work in caring for their disabled family members, while the workshops conducted contributed to comprehensive community health in the context of the disability-inclusive centers referred to.

**Keywords:** Disability; Integral Community Health; Alternative Therapies.



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## **RESUMEN**

**Introducción:** la atención a las personas discapacitadas en el campo de la salud constituye una de las prioridades actuales de la sociedad. Los organismos internacionales han resaltado su relevancia y la necesidad de concretar acciones que contribuyan a ello en la salud comunitaria integral, a lo cual la Universidad Regional Autónoma de Los Andes se ha incorporado.

**Objetivo:** desarrollar terapias alternativas para mitigar los niveles de estrés en los cuidadores de los centros del Peral 1 y 2 de la municipalidad de Ambato, Ecuador.

**Métodos:** Se emplearon los métodos analítico-sintético e inductivo deductivo, a la vez que la revisión bibliográfica y la encuesta.

**Resultados:** se determinó la frecuencia con que se presentan síntomas de estrés en los cuidadores de las personas discapacitadas en los centros de atención a discapacitados Peral 1 y 2 de la municipalidad de Ambato; el diagnóstico del nivel de conocimiento de las terapias alternativas de aromaterapia, musicoterapia y técnicas de relajación en ellos; así como una propuesta de talleres de capacitación acerca de dichas terapias y su implementación.

**Conclusiones:** los cuidadores de las personas con discapacidad están sometidas a un alto grado de estrés como resultado de la frecuencia e intensidad de su labor al cuidar a sus familiares discapacitados, a la vez que los talleres realizados contribuyeron a la salud comunitaria integral en el contexto de los centros inclusivos de discapacidades referidos.

Palabras Clave: Discapacidad; Salud Comunitaria Integral; Terapias Alternativas.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Today's society is projected on all levels to achieve equity for its members. This is an essential goal that speaks to the degree of humanization of this society. However, this is an ideal that must be implemented in the most varied fields of social life, including health and social participation.

Specifically, caring for people with disabilities is one of the permanent challenges to be able to put this ideal into practice. Disability should not be seen as something pejorative or exclusive, but rather as another aspect of human diversity, closely connected to the full validity of human rights.

In this regard, the United Nations in its Strategy for Disability Inclusion, has made it clear that "the observance Full and complete realization of the human rights of all persons with disabilities is an inalienable component, inseparable and indivisible from all human rights and fundamental freedoms".<sup>(1)</sup>

The incorporation of people with disabilities into social life must be addressed and projected on several essential levels, such as employment, education, health and social protection.



The World Report on Disability, prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank (WB), accurately summarizes several of the disabling barriers that exist, including inadequate policies and regulations, negative attitudes, limited service provision, poor funding, lack of accessibility, limited consultation and participation, as well as lack of data and evidence; while also specifying the effects or disadvantages that such barriers generate in the lives of disabled people, including poorer health outcomes, poorer academic results, lower economic participation, higher poverty rates, greater dependency and limited participation.<sup>(2)</sup>

Likewise, various studies have recently been devoted to analyzing the most varied aspects related to people with disabilities, not so much in the clinical field but from broader perspectives, such as the study of the social skills of these people,<sup>(3)</sup> the factors that influence the success or failure of ventures carried out by people with disabilities,<sup>(4)</sup> the positive and negative consequences of the use of social networks by people with disabilities and the need for digital inclusion of these people,<sup>(5)</sup> the impact of social workers and public-private cooperation to care for disabled people, even taking advantage of so-called digital intervention,<sup>(6)</sup> the use of art to develop therapies that contribute to the mental and emotional health of the disabled,<sup>(7)</sup> the humanization of centers for care of people with disabilities by transforming them from institutions into homes, with the participation of all those involved.<sup>(8)</sup>

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has highlighted the indispensable potential of local development and the use of resources and spaces that exist there, to address and implement actions that favor the improvement of care for people with disabilities. Proposing a guide of good practices in this direction, it has stated that "Inclusive local development promotes dual-purpose approaches pathway for disability, complementing measures universal in favor of inclusion, with adjustments, support and tools that meet specific needs so that the solutions are comprehensive and continuous." (9)

This is why comprehensive community health is also part of the spaces and ways to promote and implement actions aimed at the increasingly humane treatment and care of people with disabilities.

This connects directly with the new approaches to disability care promoted by WHO, which highlight the relevance of inclusive community-based development and inclusive health itself.

In line with this, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has stated: "Today, it is understood that disability arises from the interaction between a person's health status or deficiency and the multitude of factors that influence their environment." (10)

In Ecuador there are currently 480,776 disabled people, according to the National Council for Equality of Disabilities.<sup>(11)</sup>

In this context, there are a number of alternative therapies that can contribute to improving the care of people with disabilities, affecting both these people and those who care for the disabled.

Educational institutions, particularly universities, should not be excluded from this, as part of their social mission and in their relationship with society they have the task of caring for and promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Hence, the Regional Autonomous University of the Andes in Ecuador has been carrying out a series of actions with the authorities of the municipality of Ambato to care for disabled people and their caregivers in community centers dedicated to caring for this type of individuals, in particular, in the communities of Peral 1 and 2 of said locality.



In 2022, a total of 125 disabled people accompanied by their family caregivers were in these two centres. The latter showed symptoms of high levels of stress due to the degree of dependence of their disabled relatives on them and the tension this generates, while they were largely unaware of the potential of using alternative, non-pharmacological therapies to care for and look after themselves and thus better care for their disabled relatives.

Hence, the scientific problem of the present study lies in how to improve the care of people with disabilities in the Peral 1 and 2 centers of the municipality of Ambato, Ecuador.

In light of this, this research has set itself the objective of developing alternative therapies to mitigate stress levels in caregivers at the Peral 1 and 2 centers in the municipality of Ambato, Ecuador.

#### **METHODS**

The research was qualitative and field-based, taking place in a given community context and investigating emotional and psychological aspects associated with reducing stress levels in disabled people and their caregivers.

Analytical-synthetic theoretical methods were used to examine and assess the existing bibliography on the subject, as well as inductive-deductive methods to extract experiences and good practices in the use of alternative therapies carried out in other research and contexts.

In addition, various empirical methods were used, including a bibliographic review, in order to determine the main studies that have addressed this topic.

The survey was also used, through the application of three questionnaires with the following purposes and characteristics:

- questionnaire for caregivers of people with disabilities with the aim of knowing the most frequent stress symptoms they present.
- questionnaire for caregivers of people with disabilities in order to determine their level of knowledge about alternative therapies to reduce stress.
- questionnaire to caregivers of people with disabilities about their level of satisfaction with the activities carried out.

The population and sample of those involved in the research were the 125 caregivers of disabled people from the inclusive centers for the disabled Peral 1 and Peral 2 in the municipality of Ambato, province of Tungurahua, Ecuador. For this purpose, a sample selection was made of eight technicians who care for the disabled in both centers.

It is worth noting that the disabled people were children with predominantly physical disabilities, and due to their characteristics they were accompanied in all cases by their parents or family caregivers, with their informed consent.



For the application of the surveys of symptoms and level of knowledge of alternative therapies; the implementation of participatory and training workshops for disabled people, their caregivers and the technical staff of the centers; as well as the satisfaction survey of the actions carried out, the participation of 38 students from the tenth semester of the UNIANDES Medicine degree associated with the community outreach project of said university institution with the municipality of Ambato was counted on, during the months of May to October of the year 2022.

#### **RESULTS**

The results of the research were based on a questionnaire that determined the most frequent stress symptoms experienced by caregivers of people with disabilities.

The symptoms that were investigated in caregivers were the following:

- Headache
- Fatigue
- Back and chest pain
- Very sleepy
- Nightmares
- Difficulty sleeping
- Concerns
- Difficulty remembering
- Fear
- Need to consume tobacco
- Family problems
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Stiff neck or jaw
- Irritability
- Upset stomach
- Difficulty concentrating

The scale used to determine the presence of these symptoms was: Always, Sometimes, Never.

The most relevant results of this survey were the following:

- All symptoms were stated to have been experienced with a frequency of "Sometimes."
- In addition, the symptoms that were recognized as being experienced with the frequency of "Always" were nightmares, difficulty sleeping, worries, constipation, stomach upset and fatigue.

Added to this are the results of the questionnaire regarding the level of knowledge of caregivers regarding various alternative therapies to reduce stress.

The alternative therapies selected were:

- Aromatherapy: this uses the different properties of plants for relaxation purposes.
- Music therapy: different sounds and melodies are included to harmonize the environment.
- some guided relaxation techniques: seeking homeostasis between mind, body and environment; such as tensing and relaxing, meditation and deep breathing techniques.



The results obtained by each of the centers are shown in Table 1:

- 89,5 % know little or nothing about lavender as a plant to reduce stress.
- 92 % know little or nothing about the tea tree as a plant to reduce stress.
- 71 % know little or nothing about geranium as a plant to reduce stress.
- 93 % know little or nothing about citronella as a plant to reduce stress.

**Table 1.** Degree of knowledge of caregivers about plants to reduce stress.

FLOORS	DEGREE	PEAR 1 %	PEAR 2 %	TOTAL AVERAGE
Lavender	A lot	6	15	10.5
	Bit	28	49	38.5
	Nothing	66	36	51
Tea tree	A lot	3	13	8
	Bit	16	56	36
	Nothing	81	31	56
Geranium	A lot	3	55	29
	Bit	22	27	24.5
	Nothing	75	18	46.5
Citronella	A lot	3	11	7
	Bit	13	33	23
	Nothing	84	56	70

Source: questionnaire

Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents (61,2 %) stated that they are aware of the use of music therapy to reduce stress.

However, when we asked them if they used music therapy in their work to cope with the stress caused by caring for their disabled relatives, the vast majority of them stated that they did not do so and that they did not know how to do so.

**Table 2.** Caregivers' knowledge about the use of music therapy to reduce stress.

KNOWLEDGE	PEAR 1 %	PEAR 2 %	TOTAL AVERAGE
Yeah	66	56.4	61.2
No	34	43.6	38.8

Source: questionnaire

Table 3 shows that the majority of respondents (66,3 %) stated that they know some relaxation technique to reduce stress.

However, when asked if they actually used any of these techniques, most of them stated that they did not do so and that they did not know how to do it.



**Table 3.** Caregivers' knowledge of some relaxation technique to reduce stress.

KNOWLEDGE	PEAR 1 %	PEAR 2 %	TOTAL AVERAGE
Yeah	87	45.5	66.3
No	13	54.5	33.7

Source: questionnaire

As a result of all the above it was foundthe presence of various symptoms associated with stress in caregivers of people with disabilities at the Peral 1 and 2 centers, as well as a real lack of knowledge about the use of alternative therapies to reduce these frequent levels of stress.

Based on the previous results, a series of participation, training and implementation workshops were proposed to make known the characteristics and properties of lavender, tea tree, geranium and citronella plants to reduce stress; the potential of music therapy to achieve these ends; various relaxation techniques; all of this combined with training and showing the use of these plants, musical therapies and various relaxation techniques that contribute to reducing stress in disabled people and their caregivers.

These workshops and activities involved both disabled people, their caregivers, and the technical staff who assisted them at the aforementioned centers.

The following workshops and activities were held:

- Workshop to socialize the characteristics of lavender, tea tree, geranium and citronella plants and their potential to reduce stress. This activity was accompanied by practical demonstrations on how to prepare these plants, how to properly use the essential oils available for each of them and their application with humidifiers that spread their aromas and create a relaxed environment conducive to reducing stress.
- Workshop to socialize the characteristics of music therapy and its potential to reduce stress.
  Different types of melodies were selected, combining at different times and according to the
  moods of the disabled people and their caregivers, both soft instrumental music and other
  more lively and cheerful ones, together with sounds of nature, which promoted listening and
  enjoying them, helping these people to relax and increase their concentration on tasks
  entrusted to them, while at other times group dancing was encouraged.
- Workshop to socialize some relaxation techniques to reduce stress. In this case, techniques such as tensing and relaxing, meditation techniques and deep breathing were taught. These were implemented with caregivers and disabled people so that they could experience their positive effect.

Likewise, at certain times in the same workshop, various alternative therapy techniques were simultaneously combined, where at the same time an appropriate environment was created with humidifiers, relaxing music was played and some of the techniques indicated to reduce stress were carried out, confirming both through the behaviors and through the expressions and criteria of the disabled people present and their caregivers the positive results in reducing stress.

A video that captures the realization of these workshops can be viewed at the following internet link: <a href="https://youtu.be/Y6CcGjw">https://youtu.be/Y6CcGjw</a> To



The combined use of these alternative therapies showed the various benefits they provided, among which the following stood out:

- relief from the stresses of daily life.
- helps you regain and maintain emotional and physical balance.
- the complement to treat various emotional problems and practical problems.
- helping to prevent the development of physical illnesses and/or alleviate them when they are already present.

These comprehensive community health actions based on the use of alternative therapies went beyond the time of the workshops held in centers for the care of the disabled, since the caregivers also practiced them and transferred them to the spaces and moments of their homes, while the technical staff in charge of accompaniment and care in these centers were trained in them and appropriated their ways of being systematically applied in the daily life of said centers.

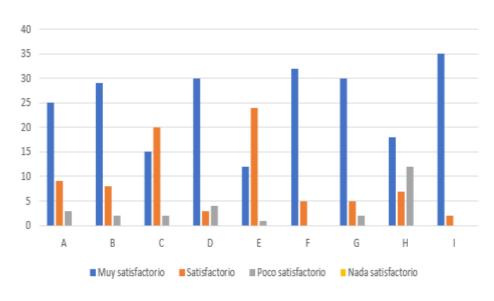
Finally, a questionnaire was applied to 39 of the caregivers from both centers about their level of satisfaction with the activities carried out in the research through the execution of the linkage project associated with it.

The questionnaire investigated the following questions:

- A. What is your assessment of the project to connect with society that UNIANDES developed at its centre for the disabled?
- B. How would you rate the quality of the workshops and activities carried out?
- C. I would appreciate that your expectations regarding the workshops and activities carried out have been met.
- D. Do you consider that the workshops and activities carried out have contributed to improving your quality of life and/or local development?
- E. He believes that the workshops and activities carried out allowed the university to get closer to its community.
- F. How would you rate compliance with the schedule and timetables of the workshops and activities carried out?
- G. I would appreciate the honesty, fairness and responsibility with which the teachers and students in charge of implementing the workshops and activities carried out acted.
- H. How would you rate the discipline of the teachers and students in charge of implementing the workshops and activities carried out?
- I. What is your assessment of the skills and attitudes of teachers and students in the development of the workshops and activities carried out?

Regarding this, the results are represented in graph 1:





Source: questionnaire

**Chart 1.** Level of satisfaction of caregivers with the activities performed.

The above shows a predominant favorable criterion regarding the quality and satisfaction of the activities carried out in the research and in the implementation of its results.

Another practical result achieved during the research was that the medical students involved were able to acquire communication skills, as they adapted the content of the activities carried out with the disabled and their caregivers to a language they could understand.

During the workshops, participating students were able to demonstrate their acquisition of professional skills for health promotion and disease prevention.

### **DISCUSSION**

The above results are in full correspondence and align with the guidelines issued by the Pan American Health Organization, contained in the Strategy and Plan of Action on Health Promotion in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals, where it is stated that the approach to health care "has not adequately incorporated a community-based health promotion approach" and that includes, among others, people with disabilities, calling for "promoting research that focuses on multisectoral approaches to health promotion", part of which is precisely comprehensive community health, calling for taking into consideration among its activities those related to "updating, developing and disseminating training guides and materials to guide the incorporation of health promotion activities in the provision of services in the context of primary health care" that considers the actions of universities and collaborating centers, among other relevant actors.

In line with the results of this research, a study carried out in Cuenca, Ecuador, emphasizes the need to develop social programs that address and promote health-related quality of life in people with physical disabilities, taking into consideration various domains or levels, such as the physical, psychological, social relations and environmental, all of which would impact both public policies and clinical practice and research.<sup>(13)</sup>



A study carried out in an adult care center in Trujillo, Peru, clearly establishes the favorable reciprocal relationship between older adults who practice some alternative therapies and the elevation of their self-esteem, (14) with which we agree.

An experience in the use of alternative therapies in Ecuador shows the benefits of their use in people with disabilities, also in centers for the care of this type of individuals, emphasizing in this case the use of alternative therapies such as canotherapy, equine therapy and multisensory therapy, which shows the broad spectrum that alternative therapies include to be used for the care of these people.

Likewise, it coincides with a research also carried out in Ecuador, which characterizes the negative effects of stress on caregivers of people with disabilities and its emotional, physical and psychological repercussions on these individuals. $^{(16)}$ 

Similarly, a study carried out in Pará, Brazil, proposes and confirms the positive consequences of training teams of caregivers in a senior care center and its favorable impact on the psychological well-being of such adults, evidenced in the prevention or minimization of feelings of fear, insecurity, abandonment and anxiety in them, <sup>(17)</sup> in which several of the symptoms of stress that were detected and treated in the present research coincide.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Caregivers of people with disabilities are subject to a high level of stress as a result of the frequency and intensity of their work in caring for their disabled relatives. Alternative therapies have invaluable potential to complement and support the improvement of care for people with disabilities and their caregivers. The research showed that the care of people with disabilities was strengthened through the use of alternative therapies, reducing stress levels in caregivers at the Peral 1 and 2 centers in the municipality of Ambato, Ecuador, leading to an improvement in their physical, mental and emotional state of relaxation. The workshops carried out within the framework of the research and its associated community outreach project contributed to comprehensive community health in the context of the Peral 1 and 2 inclusive disability centres of the municipality of Ambato, showing the validity of health education and its contribution to prevention and health promotion in a community. On the other hand, beyond the sessions and meetings held in the aforementioned community centres, people with disabilities and their caregivers were able to transfer the socialised techniques to their living spaces, allowing them to apply them systematically to achieve a decrease in stress levels and thus improve their health status.

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