

men. The reasons for these gender disparities are largely unknown. An explanation of these finding is that women are more likely to be juggling many roles including worker, mother, carer for elderly parents, homemaker, and sometimes breadwinner, thereby experiencing significantly higher stress levels than men (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

The analysis of occupational status showed that students reported lower levels of well-being compared to workers and retired people. This finding has also emerged in previous research (Baloran, 2020; Quintiliani *et al.*, 2021; Ryerson, 2020; Sahu, 2020), which highlights the strong psychological consequences of the pandemic on students due to the limitation of the relationships and the replacement of in person lessons with distance learning. Although the underlying mechanisms are not clear yet, some studies suggested that the lower scores in psychological well-being in younger people could be due to their greater access to COVID-19 information through the media (Mazza *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2020). A meta-analysis on university students and psychological well-being (Davies *et al.*, 2014) pointed out that young people are increasingly withdrawing into digital technologies. This undoubtedly drives the need to think about new modes of care, such as including a mandatory psychologist at school or at university as a post-pandemic mental health support and/or introducing Internet-based interventions about mental illness prevention. These are considered appropriate for students because the Internet is highly accessible, and they also use it to seek health-related information.

Other significant results emerged in differences in the marital status variable, in which married individuals reported higher levels of psychological well-being compared to unmarried ones. These differences may suggest that having a partner during the pandemic can help a person feel supported and improves psychological well-being. This hypothesis is closely related to recent studies conducted on the Italian population, which showed how the home atmosphere and having a partner might have influenced the choice of adopting some specific coping strategies (Mari *et al.*, 2020; Tintori *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, Donato *et al.* (2021) have shown that COVID-19 concerns can be a stimulus to activate the couple as a resource. Indeed, dyadic coping plays a critical role in reducing stress and restoring well-being in stressful situations (Bodenmann *et al.*, 2011; Rusu *et al.*, 2015). These studies, together with the results obtained in the present study, led us to consider the importance of implementing preventive couple interventions so that dyadic coping can become an indispensable resource available in emergency situations.

Finally, the ANOVA indicated that the group of people who suffered from COVID-19 did not significantly differ in terms of well-being from those who did not have the virus. This result is not surprising, as it is in line with previous studies (Brodeur *et al.*, 2021; Rossi *et al.*, 2020). It is conceivable that, regardless of virus infection, people

equally exposed to containment measures experienced similar discomfort. Again, it appears that people exposed to lockdown, regardless of their physical health status, reported boredom, loneliness, worry, and sadness (Brodeur *et al.*, 2021), elements that run counter to psychological well-being.

The multiple hierarchical regression analysis revealed some significant associations between psychological well-being and the different coping strategies adopted by Italians.

First, the greater the Positive-oriented style, the greater the psychological well-being. Recent studies (Gurvich *et al.*, 2021; Sica *et al.*, 2021) have demonstrated that positive coping strategies are associated with a reduced risk of psychological symptoms. A positive mindset can be considered as a functional coping strategy that allows individuals to positively reinterpret negative situations. It is associated with self-efficacy, a better quality of life, and greater psychological well-being (Flesia *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, a Positive-oriented disposition may help to relieve worries and negative thinking generated by the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, Avoidance-oriented coping negatively influenced the perception of well-being in this Italian sample. Specifically, avoidance is a behavioural strategy of avoiding negative situations and refusing to deal with problems. This mechanism, after many months of the pandemic, can be a way to avoid the contingent stressful situation. This consideration is in line with previous studies related to pandemics that have found some significant correlations between avoidance strategies and emotional distress (Sim *et al.*, 2010; Taha *et al.*, 2013). In particular, the literature highlights that Avoidant coping is linked to increased PTSD symptom development following a trauma (Caspi *et al.*, 2005; Hooberman *et al.*, 2010). According to Tiet *et al.* (2006), this happens because denying the severity of a problem and trying not to think about it may lead to more recurrent and intrusive recollections of the trauma.

The results show that the study sample tended to use this mechanism considerably and suggest that psychological problems in the general Italian population are likely to increase. Therefore, it is important to start questioning how psychopathology will change after the pandemic to find new treatment directions.

Another coping style that negatively influenced well-being was Social support. This is a controversial finding. According to the literature, some recent studies (Agbaria & Mokh, 2021; Sica *et al.*, 2021) have underlined that social support is not related to psychological distress, but on the other hand, many others (Kotera *et al.*, 2021; Faustino *et al.*, 2020) have emphasised that loneliness, because of the avoidance of the use of Social support, strongly negatively influences levels of psychological well-being.

It is possible that the result of the current study was also influenced by the COPE items (*e.g.*, 'I ask people how they acted when faced with similar experiences'/'I

seek moral support from friends and relatives', *etc.*). These types of questions might not be sufficiently adequate to frame the dimension of social support during the pandemic where everyone was in the same situation, which they had never been experienced before, *i.e.*, facing COVID-19. In this context, maybe it was not easy to support each other. Moreover, social support implies in some way direct contact with others, who may themselves be potential transmitters of the virus. Therefore, the people in the sample might have considered this to be a risk factor. However, since humans are by nature involved in social bonding, it is important to better understand this aspect with further studies. The perception of social support as a resource could be restored through specific interventions where needed. A clinical implication could therefore be considering group therapy, as demonstrated in a recent Italian study conducted in March 2020 (Brusadelli *et al.*, 2020). The authors proposed support group interventions to address the crisis caused by the pandemic; it was found that, thanks to the group experience, the study sample learned to focus on the here and now, to tolerate difficulties, and to understand their feelings.

The other two coping strategies, *i.e.*, Problem-focused and Transcendent-oriented, were not statistically significant.

The relationship between the Problem-focused style and psychological well-being during periods of high uncertainty is still unclear (Sica *et al.*, 2021). In fact, the adoption of a problem-solving strategy, usually associated with more adaptive outcomes (MacCann *et al.*, 2011), may not be suitable to deal with the emergency due to the unpredictable nature of the virus. Thus, people may feel unable to control the virus and the subsequent impact on their lives.

Regarding transcendent-oriented coping, it is possible that, due to the restrictions and the perceived risks, people may be less involved in praying and religious practices. Furthermore, the tool (COPE) may not be suitable for assessing the religious dimension during a pandemic. Indeed, a recent study (Kowalczyk *et al.*, 2020), contrary to the findings of this study, demonstrated that exposure to COVID-19 enhances faith and spirituality in general. Nevertheless, the results of the present study need further exploration with additional research.

This study presents some limitations that need to be mentioned. First, this study was conducted online, limiting the possibility to control for external variables or temporal dynamics. Second, the measures were all self-report clinical questionnaires. In particular, some COPE items may not be appropriate to detect the above discussed variables (Social support and Transcendent-oriented coping) during the pandemic period. In addition, other factors that could potentially contribute to the associations between coping style and well-being (*e.g.*, personality traits, presence of psychopathological diagnosis) were not examined, and these factors could be influential in the

development of preventive and/or supportive mental health actions. Another potential limitation is the fact that the sample was predominantly female (73.6%), thereby limiting the generalisability concerning the differences that emerged according to gender.

Conclusions

In Italy, COVID-19 still has a strong negative impact on people's mental health. As suggested by Kim & Crimmins (2020), it is fundamental to understand the factors motivating people to adopt recommended behavioural changes in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and how they differ in a non-clinical population. The findings of the current study could help therapists in clinical practice in orienting their patients towards the awareness that the use of maladaptive coping strategies (*e.g.*, avoidance-oriented) can fuel negative symptoms such as anxiety or depression.

It is also important to consider the possible ineffectiveness of social support in this frame and the need to create internet-based health promotion interventions where people can confront themselves without necessarily having to face each other with the fear of infection caused by the spread of the virus. Thus, the findings may be crucial in the development of policies and strategies for mental health professionals to promote useful strategies to cope with the long duration of the pandemic.

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