More mental health in oncology

When we talk about health and mental illness there is a tendency for people to withdraw. Stigma, fear, prejudice and stereotypes keep people away from talking about mental health, from seeking help, from taking on a health problem. There is no health without mental health. In order to feel good about ourselves and reach our maximum professional and personal potential, we must have a satisfactory level of well-being.

We know that cancer disease brings suffering to the patient and family. It affects the quality of life as, in addition to the physical symptoms, the confrontation with the idea of death and a threat to the individual's integrity becomes imminent.

We also know that oncology professionals are more likely to develop compassion fatigue and burnout.

.

If we know all this, why do we still have difficulties in talking about mental health? Why do we have low mental health literacy levels? We ourselves have to acknowledge that being a cancer nurse is difficult! It's difficult because we work in shifts, affecting our family and social life, because we take care of people in the final stage of life, because of the relentless pace of work required to take care of everyone, for various reasons. But because it is difficult, we sometimes need psychological support. In order to take care of others, we have to first take care of ourselves. We have to be the ones to make our managers see that we need to be taken care of – to be able to play our role more effectively. So…

Let's make Mental Health First Aid as common as CPR.

We therefore need to have programmes in place in our workplaces for training courses in Mental Health First Aid, which allow us to recognise signs and symptoms of psychological distress and/or mental illness. In this way, we will be able to provide first aid to people in psychological distress.

We must think about it both in terms of the patient and family and in the healthcare team. Incorporating this course makes people more available to talk about mental health, encouraging early intervention, reducing stigma around mental health issues, and creating a more positive workplace culture.

There are even a few ways to start a conversation about mental health that might be helpful:

1. **Don't wait to find the perfect moment**
The moment we idealise may not spontaneously occur, so we have to create it. Sometimes it's easier to talk about our thoughts and feelings if we're doing something relaxed like a lunch break or drinking coffee in the middle of the shift.

2. **Ask twice**
We know that people often say they're fine when they're not. So asking twice is an important way of starting conversations about mental health and letting people know that you really are interested. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable opening up if someone asks, "how are you?" because we think they're just being polite. But if that person says, "no, really, is everything OK?" we know that they're not just going through the motions. Even if someone doesn't feel like talking at that moment, they know you'll be there to listen when they're ready.

3. **Talk about yourself**
If we want someone to feel free to talk to us, we must give space and share our feelings and concerns. The other person will feel they have space to speak freely and without judgement.

4. **Approach the elephant in the room**
If you think someone has been acting differently you can mention that too in a kind way. "You've seemed a bit quiet recently, is everything alright? I'm here if you want to talk." This shows that you care and opens the door for them to chat about things when they're ready. If someone took some time off work recently you can ask: "How are things now?" or "Are you back at work?" shows that person that they have nothing to feel awkward about and they can talk with you.

5. **It doesn't have to be face to face**
If you have difficulty talking about this subject you can always send a text message or Whatsapp. Just remember to open the door so they can feel comfortable if they want to talk.

Remember, there is no health without mental health