

# The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Teachers

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## **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic started in Romania in February 2020, a year which brought us many restrictions, as well as a large number of challenges. Everything changed: the educational system, the healthcare system, the whole field of work. Two years we were challenged incessantly, we never knew what was going to come next. In this article I will present the restrictions, the most important changes this period brought about from the perspective of teachers. I will also present and analyze research contexts which included 50 participants, all teachers in Tg-Mures, in order to bring some answers to the questions involving the educational system, the ethical aspects of the decisions made and vaccination.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, teachers, vaccination, restrictions.*

## *Introduction*

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania dates back to February 26, 2020. This was when the first case of illness was identified in our country. Not shortly after, a state of emergency was declared, which came with various restrictions, such as closing the schools, malls, pubs or country borders. In a few months, the state of emergency was changed to a state of alert, which implied some relaxations, maintaining, however, some of the previous restrictions as well. By the end of the year 2020, the first authorized vaccines appeared on the market, which decreased the chances of people contracting the virus and prevented them from the serious effects of the disease.

Taking in consideration the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic was spread all over the world, it can be classified as a catastrophic event, which led to infodemics and misinformation.

Our lives changed radically. Teachers were affected twice as much. Firstly, we had to confront our own anxiety about the situation, but we also had to offer support to the children and their parents. At the same time, we had to learn new techniques by ourselves in order to be able to do our job. Fortunately, we were part

of the first group of people who had access to vaccines. Our decisions weren't the same: some of us accepted vaccines, others did not.

In this research I followed the teachers' level of anxiety, the time spent by them following the news and also the way they chose for their activity. The research data came from a period of time spanning between the years 2020 and 2021. The research is both quantitative and qualitative.

### *Restrictions in 2020 and 2021*

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, it was declared a state of emergency in Romania. Prior to this, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the first restriction was announced: the closing of the schools from the following day. In a few days, other restrictions came regarding the health system: patients didn't have the right to get out of the hospital building until being discharged, a triage was introduced for everyone who entered the hospital. Afterwards, some of the hospitals' sections that were considered less crucial were suspended and transformed in COVID-support clinics.

At the same time, all the pubs were closed, as well as clubs, restaurants, malls, which affected everyday life, in all of its aspects: social, economic, healthcare, educational.

The most important restrictions were the obligation to wear a face mask (at first, only in closed spaces, then in public spaces too), the regular hand disinfection, social distancing, quarantine, completing a declaration when going out, online education. Later, the vaccines appeared, the green certificate (which gave us the right to enter some shops, restaurants or participate in a few events).

### *Restrictions in the educational system*

The pandemic first impacted the educational system on March 11<sup>th</sup> 2020. This was the first day on which the physical classes were suspended. Initially, this restriction was introduced only for two weeks, when nobody knew what was going to happen, and nobody knew what exactly we should do. After the first two weeks, we were announced that teaching would continue online. For almost two months we didn't have a platform on which we could work, so everyone was forced to improvise, under their own guidance. By April 2020, every school had chosen a method of work, a platform to use for education, so now everybody had to learn how to use the new platforms.

The next school year, 2020-2021, started with new rules: the disinfection of the hands, wearing the face mask and maintaining the social distance were still

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necessary. During this period of time, different ‘scenarios’ were respected: red, yellow and green – which were correlated with the infection rate of each county. The green scenario meant face-to-face education for everyone, the yellow one meant hybrid education (face-to-face and online, classes were divided in two groups) and the red scenario meant online teaching. The form of education (face-to-face, hybrid, online) also depended on the number of cases in each class and in the school.

In the school year 2021-2022 the scenarios were modified: hybrid teaching disappeared. A few weeks later, everything depended exclusively on the number of infected pupils. Next, the government decided to introduce a ‘forced’ holiday, until they were able to find a better solution. After this, we were allowed to go back to school face-to-face. However, the infected pupils and teachers participated in online courses. If the number of infected children was high in a same class, the whole class was going to learn online for five days. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2022, all the restrictions were lifted: the state of alert ended. From that point on, all the earlier obligations disappeared, which meant that at least half of the children and teachers did not have to wear the face mask anymore and social distancing was no longer practiced. After the holiday in April 2022, almost everybody seemed to have forgotten all the restrictions and recommendations. The society appeared to be back to normal.

### *Anxiety*

The origin of the concept ‘anxiety’ can be identified in the existentialist philosophical current. This is a psychic manifestation firstly studied by philosophers and, later, also by psychologists. Anxiety can become a condition when always present in a person's life, who shows constant excessive care. Anxiety can be triggered by different events or situations (David et al., 2000). So the appearance of anxiety as a characteristic is correlated with COVID-19 pandemic, which changed our everyday lives totally. In those two years we had to deal with all the restrictions, we reduced socialization and, most importantly, we were at all times stressed by the uncertainty of the situation.

### *Biopolitics, vaccination, fake news*

Biopolitics represents the base of our actual political system, which says that we have to focus on conserving our life with the support of medicine (Foucault, 2006). The medical ethics principles are based on biopolitics, utilitarianism and Kant’s deontological ethics. Medicine started to develop more and more in the last

few centuries, in order to save as many lives as possible. In order to do so, researchers took technology to a higher level so as to be able to create new medicines, new treatments.

Vaccines are one important contribution of advanced medicine. The first one was used in 1796. In the last decades, doctors created a list of vaccines that every child should get, in order to stop and decrease the rates of some dangerous diseases. The first COVID-19 vaccines appeared in 2021. Vaccinating is not mandatory, but it is firmly recommended. Everybody can decide whether to get vaccinated or not. The affirmative decision can be taken from debt or according to duty (Kant, 1995). If one got vaccinated because he or she was scared of the disease, then that person took the decision according to duty. In the case of the doctors who decided to get vaccinated because this was the only possibility to save others' lives, they took the decision from debt. Therefore, their decision was a moral, ethical one.

Taking in consideration the fact that COVID-19 pandemic affected the whole world, we could see and be certain about the appearance of an infodemic. An infodemic appears when a catastrophic event takes place: it implies an abundance of information all over the media. The problem is that this phenomenon increases the number of 'lay journalists', who are simple people who present their own ideas as if they were verified and reliable information. In this way, especially because of the increasing social media activity, fake news appears, which is read by many people. It is posted on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, which are the most popular social platforms, and becomes viral, misleading a lot of people who read this information. The same thing happened throughout these past two years, when people were divided in different groups: the ones who believed in the virus, the others who did not; the group of people who trusted the vaccines and the group who did not (Germani & Biller-Andorno, 2021).

### *Research*

The main objective of the present research was to identify, follow and analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' lives. I collected information from 50 teachers from Targu Mures about their habits of watching the news, their mental state, with a view on the correlation between following the news and their anxiety level. At the same time, I was interested in whether they got used to some of the changes, restrictions, and also in their opinion about the morality of the restrictions. I collected data about the vaccination situation and

analyzed it in order to determine the factors that influenced the teacher's decisions of vaccinating or not.

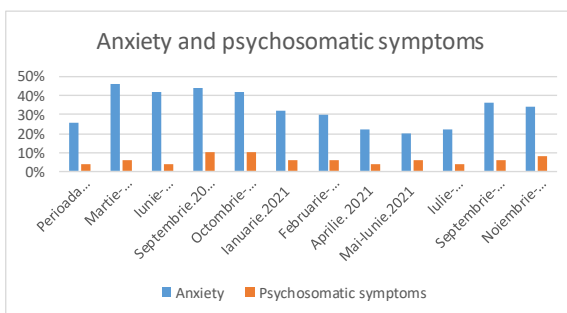
The research involved 50 teachers from Targu Mures: 58% of them were 41-60 years old, 38 % – 21-40 years old and 4 % – over 60 years old. From the 50 people, 24% were men and 76% women. 80% of the participants were high school teachers and 20% were teaching at a primary and secondary school level.

The instruments I used for the quantitative research were forms, questionnaires formulated by myself, which included questions about the changes that were recently introduced. I structured the questionnaires into five or six periods, in order to follow each and every change, restriction or relaxation, and cover the whole 2020-2021 school year. For the qualitative research, I used a semi-structured interview, which was composed of 17 questions.

For the quantitative research I proposed five hypotheses. Firstly, we can see from the collected data that there is a significant difference between the anxiety level in the year 2020 and that of 2021. In the pre-pandemic period, before March 2020, 26% of the participants identified anxiety as being present in their lives. In the first two months of the pandemic, this percentage increased to 46; during the summer break, it decreased to 42% and after the start of school in September, it increased again to 44%. At the end of the year 2020, after the education was transferred to online, 42% of the teachers identified the presence of anxiety in their lives. In January 2021, after the first vaccines appeared, there was a viewable decrease of the anxiety. In the first three months of the year, only 30-32% of the participants considered that they are anxious, and in April, just 20-22% of them felt anxious. Of course, in September 2021, the percent of anxious teachers increased to 34-36, which (even if it was an increase comparative to the summer period) is a visible decrease next to the percent from September 2020.

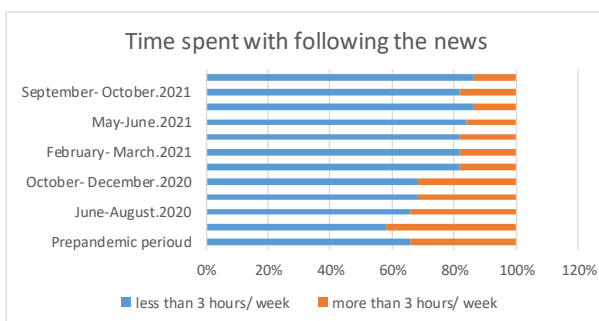
Anxiety may have physical effects too, such as headache, stomachache, loss of appetite or higher pulse. In psychology, this is called 'somatization'. The presence of these psychosomatic symptoms was identified among 4% of the participants in the pre-pandemic period. An intense increase is visible in the autumn of 2020 (10%) and also in that of 2021 (6-8%), which indicates that there is a relation between the start of school and the appearance of these symptoms. Therefore, the first hypothesis was confirmed. According to it, there is a relation between the invention of the vaccines and the teachers' anxiety level. Moreover, we can affirm that the second hypothesis was also confirmed: there is a relation between the school start and teachers' anxiety level (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** *Anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms*



Analyzing the time spent following the news, in the pre-pandemic period, 66% of the participants spent less than three hours/ week and 34% spent more than three hours/ week engaged in this activity. In the period of March–May 2020, this ratio has changed. The percent of the participants who spent more than 3 hours/ week following the news increased. In June–August 2020, the ratio was the same as in the pre-pandemic period – a result of the relaxation of the restrictions. In September – December 2020, the percentage of the teachers who spent more than 3 hours/ week following the news increased again to 68 and the percentage of the ones who were following the news less than 3 hours / week decreased to 32. In January 2021, a major decrease can be observed: 82% of the participants spent less than 3 hours/ week following the news. This ratio remains constant throughout the year 2021: only 14-18% of the participants followed the news for more than 3 hours/ week. So, we can see an explosive decrease of the time spent following the news, which means that in 2021, the participants spent less time with this activity than they ever did (it is an increase even compared to the pre-pandemic period) (Figure 2).

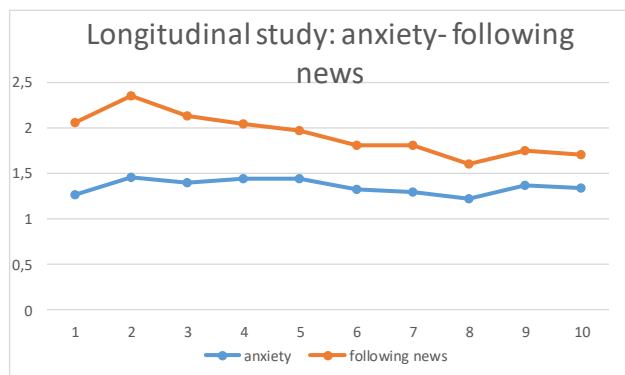
**Figure 2.** *Time spent with following the news*



We can see the same tendency in the case of anxiety too. Thus, we can observe that when the time spent following the news increases, anxiety also increases, and when the time spent following the news decreases, the anxiety

decreases as well. At the same time, I consider that the constant decrease, especially from 2021, can be explained also by the appearance of the first vaccines and people simply getting used to the restrictions (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** *Longitudinal study: anxiety- following news*



In conclusion, we can affirm that the third hypothesis was also confirmed. According to it, there is a relation between the time spent following the news and the anxiety level of the participants.

The fourth hypothesis, according to which the teachers considered that most of the restrictions were moral, acceptable, ethical, was also confirmed. (Table 1)

**Table 1**

*The acceptability of the restrictions*

The acceptability of the restrictions	
closing the school (March 2020)	74%
wearing face masks indoor	88%
social distancing	88%
completing a statement when leaving the house	54%
closing the pubs and restaurants	86%
wearing the face masks outside in crowded places	94%
restrictions in schools (September 2020)	90%
closing the schools (October 2020)	88%
wearing the face masks in- and outside	84%
finishing the first semester online (January 2021)	84%

reopening the schools for the final years (February 2021)	84%
changing the structure of the school year (March 2021)	64%
reopening the schools (May 2021)	88%
introducing the green certificate in order to have access to different events	80%
uncoupling the scenarios for schools from the infection rate in a county (October 2021)	62%
changing the structure of the school year (October 2021)	32%
introducing the green certificate in order to have access to unessential shops (October 2021)	76%

The fifth hypothesis, according to which the level of discomfort caused by the restrictions and the whole pandemic situation increases if the restriction measures are repeated for a long period of time, was confirmed as well. As we can see on Figure no. 3, both the levels of anxiety and the time spent following the news increased in time, which shows us that people got used to the measures, and once they were no longer considered to be new parts of their lives, they got used to them. The fact that there was a month and a half after the state of alert had already ceased and people still respected the habits of wearing a face mask and keeping the social distance, even though it wasn't mandatory anymore, points to the same conclusion.

In the next paragraphs, I will present the qualitative research, where I used the semi-structured interview in order to find out why the participants gave some of the above-mentioned answers in the questionnaires. I conducted six interviews, including three vaccinated and three unvaccinated participants.

From the questionnaires, I found out that the most popular source of news was television, social websites and, on the third place, web sites. The participants in the interview said that these are the most accessible and practical sources where one can follow the news. Only one person followed the news on the official sites, since a relatively recent period of time. The reason for this change was simple for her: she realized that on television, social media and news web sites appeared a lot of fake news and misinformation.

Four out of six persons considered that the restrictions in 2020 were absolutely necessary, because the whole situation was unprecedented, so "it was the only solution in order to protect ourselves and the others". Three of these participants were vaccinated and one person was unvaccinated. The other two



participants in the interview considered the restrictions as being unnecessary or partially necessary. One person said that they were partially necessary because back then, it was difficult to obtain face masks, so until the face mask crisis was solved, we needed something to be protected from. The other person considered the restrictions totally unnecessary: she had a lack of trust in authorities, as she confessed: “I felt bad when I was listening to the news, it was like they were happy because we have a problem. I felt that something was wrong with this story of the pandemic. Thanks to this behavior of the authorities, I lost all my trust in them”.

If we analyze the acceptability of the measures introduced in the spring of 2020, three persons said that, from their perspectives, the restrictions were acceptable, moral. The only restriction that was not really accepted was the mandatory completing of the statement when leaving the house. This statement represented a source of stress and it was also a bureaucratic procedure that mostly did not ensure its supposed effects. Only one person out of six considered the closing of the schools in March 2020 acceptable. At the same time, she considered that the rest of the measures taken were excessive: “they were some aberrations without any logic”. Another participant considered that closing the schools was unacceptable, because it has negative effects in the long term. One participant considered that the situation was exaggerated: “We did not get any explanations, it was like in communism”. This led to uncertainty and a lack of trust in authorities.

The relaxation in the summer months of 2020 was welcomed after two months of severe restrictions. All the participants considered that this relaxation was necessary for everyone. At the same time, two participants considered that these decisions were taken in hurry and that they mostly had economical and political reasons.

Reopening the schools in September 2020 caused divergent discussions. Two out of six participants considered that this was a huge risk, taking in consideration the fact that it implied a lot of people being in the same room (it was most certain that the number of infected people would increase). One person considered that this reopening of the schools represented a medium risk, the only problem with it was the lack of possibilities for testing. The other three persons did not consider that to be a risk, saying that the children and teenagers can be better controlled in school, then in other places. To their minds, the relaxation in summer entailed a higher risk, once the pubs and restaurants were open for everyone. One of the participants said: “The teenagers did not care, they were eating and drinking after each other. So it was the same with or without face-to-face teaching. Somehow they felt that they would be closed again. We also started to feel the

same way: we knew that we would be closed after the elections. It was like a theatrical piece”.

This reopening came with some rules too, such as keeping the social distance in the classes, disinfecting the hands, wearing the face masks. Two participants (unvaccinated) considered that these rules were unacceptable, it was simply too much for once, and, at the same time, the rules were not respected outside of the school. Three participants considered that these restrictions were absolutely necessary, the situation being severe at that time. One other participant considered that the restrictions were somehow acceptable, taking in consideration that she works in special education, with children with disabilities, and there are some cases in which the children are not capable of wearing the face masks.

In October 2020, the red scenario was implemented, which meant education should be done exclusively online. Three out of six participants considered this totally necessary and acceptable: the situation in the hospitals was catastrophic. Other two participants considered that school was not a risk or a source of infection. This was only a political decision: “When it was known a month ago what would happen, it did not seem something normal to me, not even the numbers of the infections. They had known one month ago that the number of infected people would increase, it was like a scenery that was written for the theater. I couldn’t believe that the authorities thought that we were such idiots. Of course there were problems and ill people, but the numbers didn’t reflect the truth. The manipulation on mass-media was a total disaster, many people believed them”. One participant initially did not agree with this measure. Her opinion was influenced by the fact she had to have an inspection in the class in special education, in order to achieve a higher degree. For her it was an infernal job to help the children and their parents learn how to use the educational platform of the school.

In March 2021, the Minister of Education decided to modify the structure of the school year. All the participants considered that closing the schools was necessary. Five out of six teachers considered that it would have been better if the teaching had continued online for everyone, not only for those in their final years. This holiday was detrimental to teachers in regards to their salaries, but some of them also had to work in these two weeks with the final years and two more weeks with everyone else in summer, which meant that it was double work for less money. Only for special education this was a good decision. There, it is much more difficult to work online.

In May 2021 all the schools were reopened. Everyone came back to school, teaching was face-to-face. All the participants considered this to be a good

decision: they said that if the online education was longer, it would have had negative effects. Only one participant considered that this decision was beneficial on a social and mental plan, but from the point of view of education, it was nonsensical to bring back the pupils for five or six more weeks.

The use of the green certificate (initially, only to have access to events such as concerts, later, mandatory in order to access everything unessential, plus restaurants) divided the participants in two distinct groups: the three vaccinated participants were pro green certificate: they considered it as being the only possibility to fight the pandemic and also the only solution not to destroy the economy. The other three participants, who were not vaccinated, considered that the green certificate is total nonsense, having no utility, but giving more rights to vaccinated people. They thought that there was even a risk that vaccinated people would infect the ones who were not vaccinated, on purpose or not. One of the participants said: “The unvaccinated people had the right to participate in different events by showing a negative test, which meant that they knew for sure that they were healthy and not infected. The vaccinated people did not need to do a test: they could enter anyway. In this way, many unvaccinated people entered public spaces healthy and then came out ill”.

In October 2021, the functioning of schools ceased to be correlated with the incidence ratio of the locality. Instead, it was correlated with the percentage of vaccinated teachers. All the six participants had the same opinion about this decision, but the reason for their opinion differed. The three unvaccinated participants considered that this was a method of the authorities to impose vaccination of the teachers. Once exhortation and vaccination is included as a criteria, there has to be a political reason. The other three participants, vaccinated, considered that the most important thing at that moment was to correlate the incident ratio of the county to the specific situation of each school, without differentiating between schools from the rural and urban zones. “There were many schools in rural zones where teaching was done online even if they had only one ill person, and in urban zones there were schools full of infected people, but not enough to close the school and continue online. This also had a reversed effect”, said one of the participants.

At the end October 2021, the Minister of Education decided to change the structure of the school year by introducing a two week forced holiday and shortening it by one week in the winter holiday. All the participants considered that introducing the forced holiday was totally unacceptable and useless. They considered it would have been better and more efficient if the process of teaching would have continued online.

Four out of six participants considered the hybrid teaching system was more efficient than the online system. They considered that they could teach more to all the students by being face to face every second week, especially in the case of practical applications. It is important to mention that these participants are teaching the next disciplines: Technology of Information and Communication (they usually work in a laboratory), Music (in an arts high school), Mathematics and one participant is teaching at a special school. The other two participants considered that it is more tiring to focus in two directions: wearing the face mask and being in a large room makes it more difficult to be heard by everyone from school and home as well. One of these participants is an English teacher and the other one a Physics and Chemistry teacher.

Regarding the time spent following the news, two out of six participants significantly decreased the time spent on this activity: both of them took this decision in order to maintain their mental health, considering that the situation was not going to change anyway, it was useless to spend a lot of time following the news.

Finally, the participants were asked about what influenced them in taking the decision of vaccinating or not. The three vaccinated participants took the decision to get vaccinated at the beginning of the year 2021, two of them in January and one of them in February. They took the decision in order to protect themselves and their family members too. In their opinion, vaccination is the only solution that can save us from the pandemic. The other three participants, who were unvaccinated, gave longer answers to explain their decision. One of them decided against vaccinating because, the way she saw it, this whole story was about exhortation, which meant that it was purely political. The other unvaccinated participant said that she was following many discussions, presentations of the doctors from all over the world, who considered that this vaccine was not necessary. On the other hand, she considered that the vaccine was an aberration since they offered beer and food if you get vaccinated. She totally opposed the vaccination, saying that she would rather give up her job if vaccination would become obligatory. The third participant considered that this disease is not that dangerous, so the vaccine is not something that we need. She considered that many ill people were not treated in the hospitals in the correct manner, taking in consideration the fact that medicine doesn't work the same way for everyone. On the other hand, she considered that once something is imposed, it means that it is harmful: "If we analyze history, not even one thing that was imposed by authorities and was good for the people. Vaccination is based on politics, the people who try to convince us are not even doctors, and they do not even have any specialized studies in medicine".

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Thus, through this analysis, I presented the reasons at the base of the participants' judgments. At the same time, we can affirm that the sixth hypothesis of this research was also confirmed: the decision to get or not the COVID-19 vaccine is influenced by the way of interpreting information. From the interviews, we can see that all the participants got the same information, but the interpretation and the sources were different. The three unvaccinated participants were watching the news on the television, social media and sites dedicated for news. The source or the time spent following the news did not change in time. The three vaccinated participants initially had the same sources, but two of them significantly reduced the time spent with this activity and one of them also changed the source from television and social media to the official sites of the authorities. So, I consider that the source they chose to follow the news, the time spent with it and also the way of interpreting the information also influenced their decision to get vaccinated. Another common reason for the unvaccinated participants was the lack of trust in the authorities. The vaccinated participants observed that there were some difficulties in the communication between the authorities and people: they did not give it such an importance as the unvaccinated participants did. The unvaccinated participants considered that all the restrictions and the insurances on vaccination were very similar to the means of manipulation in communism, period in which they once lived (the vaccinated participants were in the 21-40-year-old age category, while the unvaccinated participants were in the 41-60-year-old one).

### *Conclusions*

The main reason for this research was to follow and analyze the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' lives, from an ethical and psychological perspective.

Firstly, we can say that most of the restrictions were being considered as ethical, moral and necessary. The least appreciated restrictions were the completion of a statement on our own responsibility, declaring where we would go when we left our houses and the changing of the structure of the school year in October 2021. All the other restrictions were accepted, considered a necessity.

The presence of anxiety in 2020 was very visible, especially after the beginning of the pandemic. Then we could see a decrease in the levels of anxiety in the summer months, when the restrictions were relaxed, which was followed by another increase after the start of the school year once again. Once the vaccine appeared, but also after a longer period of time, we could see another decrease in the levels of anxiety. In the summer of 2021, this level decreases even under the

pre-pandemic level, which means that with the passing of time and repeating the actions (wearing a face mask, disinfecting) people got used to the changes. This way, the situation transforms into a new normality. A little increase can also be observed after reopening the schools in September 2021.

The time spent following the news has changed from the beginning of the pandemic: it had maintained at a medium level in 2020. In 2021, the teachers significantly reduced the time spent following news, which contributed to the decrease of anxiety.

The year of 2021 brought some changes in the lives of the teachers: they reduced the time spent following the news, the presence of anxiety in their lives decreased and in January started the campaign of vaccination, where teachers were prioritized. Although initially it was difficult to make an appointment for the vaccination, there were teachers who figured on the list in January and got vaccinated only in March or April. I consider that this opportunity had a positive effect on their health, physically and mentally too.

The teachers' preferences in following the news did not change much, most of them did not change their old habits and sources. Most of the teachers follow the news on television, social media and websites dedicated to news; just a few persons changed their source in time, following the news on the official sites of the authorities. The least popular sources are the newspaper and the radio.

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