

Centre for  
Mental Health



# A Year in Our Lives

## An anthology





# An introduction to the anthology

A Year in Our Lives was initiated by Centre for Mental Health in June 2020. We wanted to share how the dramatic impact of Covid-19 and resulting lockdowns was affecting people's mental health, in their own words.

Contributors were invited to respond to one question: *How has the pandemic affected your mental health?*

Over 9 months, the Centre collected and published 80 first-hand accounts of people living through the pandemic. What follows is the complete collection of diverse stories, told by people of different ages, locations and backgrounds. They share widely different perspectives; from the loss and isolation of lockdowns, to the few who found solace in a quieter, less pressurised world. These pieces are yet another reminder of the ways inequality has shaped our individual experiences of the pandemic. And together, they share a narrative history of the pandemic, from people whose voices are rarely heard.

To explore the pieces and the collection's themes in more details, check out [Reaching Inland](#), a reflective piece written by poet and activist David Gilbert.

We want to extend our heartfelt thanks to every contributor whose account is shared in this collection. Your words have made this project what it is. Thank you for trusting us with your stories, your losses, your unexpected joys and your lives.

## “Although we are all living in the same storm, we are not in the same boat”

Like most others throughout the world today and over the last few months, mental health and well-being has been fraught with concern, grief and a reminder that most things are out of our control. Since March 2020, there have been many shifts in my mental health and I accept that this will be our reality, our norm, for quite some time to come.

Never has there ever been a time when we have felt our lives in others hands and I hope that we never experience it again in our lifetimes.

At the beginning of this year, I returned to work after having a baby and experiencing the most difficult year of our lives. Having our beautiful baby was the highlight of the year, of course, but the uncertainty of how to be a Mum, how to care for our little one and how to still be a couple was difficult. On top of those usual and very normal mental health blips in our lives, our world fell apart when my husband was made redundant during that time when our little one was three months.

**“As you can imagine, even the hardest most positive person crumbles when faced with the prospect of bills, no income and a baby that needs caring for.”**

As you can imagine, even the hardest most positive person crumbles when faced with the prospect of bills, no income and a baby that needs caring for.

Thankfully, my husband got a great job but our finances suffered and as a result, I had to return to work at the beginning of January. I was confused at feeling so happy to be out to work again, having a little more time for myself and being able to achieve something that I was familiar with rather than just being able to get a long stretch of sleep from the baby. Having only just returned to work, being asked to work from home for the foreseeable future with a baby and a husband was daunting and completely winded me. I hadn't had a chance to really even 'be' and coming back home, back to where my anxious was coupled with a demanding baby and cooking/cleaning three times a day really impacted on our daily well-being, our relationship both as a couple and with our baby.

Within the first two weeks of lockdown, we found out that sadly, one of my dearest friends Father had passed away from the virus. At that moment, all realisation that this was real hit like a tidal wave. I had spent my time thinking about how I couldn't cope, trying to work out how we were going to function having to be home at all times, where we were going to get nappies and food.. and then the realisation, that our lives and people could be taken from us without warning. Hearing the horrific account of how ill he was becoming, what was happening in hospital and feeling the anguish on their behalf that they couldn't be there when finally, he had passed, was devastating. Now many weeks on, we are creating a new normal – a life where we have begun to understand what our boundaries are, appreciate the smaller things in life, come to appreciate our parents whom have now started to care for our little one whilst we work.. and although I'm not sure how our mental health will survive when we start to leave the house, get on buses and join London on the tube, I am sure that although we are all living in the same storm, we are not in the same boat.

This is the one thing I know will keep me going in the months to come.

Life is not over. Life is reborn, with new purpose and ambitions to be still, calm and to appreciate the smaller things in life.

**Anonymous**

## “A bittersweet trade off”

All I can say my experience of being in lockdown has been one hell of a ride. I will be brutally honest. When I first started to accept that as a country, we would potentially be in a situation, where some of our usual freedoms would be restricted, I had one thought. My thought was, “this will either make me or break me”.

Three months later, I still have no idea of which way I will go with that statement. I myself have struggled with my mental health for many years. 2019 was one of the worst I have ever experienced.

I started 2020, perhaps in a better place. Not majorly, but there were some positives. I was by no means stable and was experiencing very upsetting situations. I wasn't receiving much support and was mainly fending for myself.

Being someone who is always on the lookout for threat or danger, I was concerned about how devastating the COVID 19 virus could end up being. I wasn't overwhelmed with this. I was just being pragmatic. I can't talk for others, but I would guess, when there was an uptake in panic, the main focus was on having enough food and household essentials.

I was fully aware of my concern about my mental health and how I would manage, with not being able to keep to my normal routine. My day to day routine was not very exciting and never involved much social contact. From the end of 2019 until the week of lockdown, my main face to face contact was with my GP.

For some it could be questionable whether losing that face to face contact is a major fear, but from my perspective, I had a genuine unease, fearful of perhaps being back in a place that I was in last year. A place I wouldn't wish on anyone or for myself to go back to.

Sitting here now writing this, I can say my fear didn't come true, yes it has been an absolute struggle to fight to keep myself safe, Ninety percent of my time during lockdown, I have been distressed, I have probably only had at an estimate seven or so days, where I haven't cried. For me that is something new. Up until last year, I had such a wall up, that I couldn't even cry when I was by myself at home. I was unable to express my feelings through crying, even when I desperately felt I wanted to. I needed to.

This has been a bittersweet trade off from experiencing a year in lockdown. I have been able to connect to my emotions, which in a very weird way, I am grateful for. The other side of this is, that my breaking down in tears, has been very distressing. To be sat alone in your own home, totally overwhelmed and not being able to be comforted. To know that even if you express to another person, that you are feeling very distressed, the words don't seem enough to capture the depth of it.

Connected to this experience of being seen and acknowledged, is that during 2019, I for the first time in my life, was able to let someone comfort me through physical touch. That experience is something that will always stay with me, but being in lockdown, made me feel cheated. I had waited my whole to experience letting someone in, in the way I did and to have it taken away without a choice in the matter. I can logically understand that we are going through an experience that we may never imagined would happen. We all will have been impacted in someone way, not all the same, but I don't believe there will be anyone who will have gone through this time unscathed.

**“I had a genuine unease, fearful of perhaps being back in a place that I was in last year”**

Aside from being distressed with the emotional pain, I have also struggled with the unknown. There are a few people that have been in my life, through various means, but when the lockdown happened, the contact was cut at the click of a finger. Due to circumstances, I have no idea at all if they are ok. That not knowing has driven me crazy. We have heard a lot of conversations happening about being able to finally see those we care about or getting back to some normality. For myself, I would just be happy to know they are ok.

I have also experienced the realisation of what I feel is important in my life. What is it that I want for myself? Are the things I once thought what crucial to be healthy the same now or has this changed?

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To some degree there has been change, but not to a grand scale. I am very much the same person before lockdown. I still hold the same values. I still am passionate about the same things. The difference I have found, is that I feel much happier about myself as a person. I have very rarely talked as negatively towards myself, compared to the last twenty plus years. I have begun to take away the responsibility I took on for things that were out of my control and wasn't down to me. The pain that comes with that is again very distressing.

I have put boundaries in place that will help me manage my mental health. I am now in a place where I can put myself first. I have been able to stand up for myself a lot more. My diet has improved. It wasn't awful to begin with, but it is much better. I have challenged my anxieties around various situations and didn't hold back from trying something new.

I am well known for finding any reason for not speaking on the phone. Prior to lockdown I had friends who I had only communicated with via text. Spanning almost twenty years. It seems life in lockdown has meant I have now stepped up a level. I have had online video calls, regular phone calls and used various social media platforms. I feel I owe it to myself to make sure, that this becomes my new normal. If I revert back once lockdown hopefully is fully lifted, I would feel it is a disservice to the struggles I have faced and the journey I have been on.

I also think about all those who have lost someone during the lockdown. Not just through the COVID 19 virus, but in any circumstance. I personally haven't experienced losing anyone due the COVID 19 virus, but I have lost a number of people in the lead up to the lockdown and I also have people close to me who lost people close to them, one of which was someone who had taken their own life. I will never know the stories and who all these people are, but I would hope if anything, something can come of from this. I found it hard every day listening the figures rising. I was angry, because these deaths were being reported in numbers. People are not numbers, they are someone's parents, grandparents, children, siblings, extended family, colleagues etc. There were only a few background details of those who had died, that were published.

What I am trying to express is, I feel like as individuals, again can't talk for everyone, my hope would be, that we don't waste what we have learnt, to not be complacent or to think life will go back to normal.

Life as it is, won't be the same. We as people won't be the same. It's neither good nor bad. We will adapt, as we have been for the last three months. The journey will not end, when lockdown is officially over, it will be with us for years to come.

It is hard sit here and say how I am very grateful for being in lockdown. It is hard when there has been so much suffering. I don't want to be dismissive of the struggles we have all been through. But if the past three months hadn't occurred, I perhaps would have never learnt the things I have about myself and others.

In many years I hope I can look back and say “2020 was the year that made me”.

**Hayley White**

# “Despite the mental torment, glimmers of hope have started to infiltrate my days”

How has the Coronavirus Pandemic affected my mental health?

I guess I should have known this time could happen. After all we have been told we were due a worldwide pandemic for years and it has been over 100 years since the Spanish Flu Pandemic, in which my Great Aunt died.

However, nothing could have prepared me for the reality of it.

Prior to the pandemic I can't say I enjoyed good mental health. I first suffered with Anorexia Nervosa as a teenager. I spent the following 20 years mostly in recovery, with the odd year or two of slipping back into it's grasp, during which time I was blessed with my two children. A 22 year old daughter and a 14 year old son.

My anorexia returned in 2011, following an incredibly traumatic year in which I was divorced and realised I would have to sell my family home before the bank claimed it.

During the years since I have been engulfed by the illness and seen my weight drop to the point I was skeletal. During this time I developed depression again along with anxiety and suicidal thoughts. I also developed PTSD as a result of an extremely traumatic event.

As the pandemic started, I was in a position where I had gained a good amount of weight (on my own as I had to leave ED treatment for non-compliance), had medication keeping the depression in check and had monthly clinical supper from my wonderful GP as well as emotional and practical support from my Church family.

On lockdown day 1, I was sent home from my voluntary job at church and told all the services and groups would end for the unforeseeable future. My initial thoughts were that it would only be short term. I don't think it really sunk in about the gravity of the situation. My daughter, a ballerina in Paris, had already entered lockdown and was able to update me daily on their situation.

I decided I could do this! 7 day weekends and not having to set the alarm seemed like a dream come true (especially given the wonderful early Summer weather).

It did not take long, however, for the anxiety to set in. I soon realised that we would be in this for the long haul and there was nothing I could do about it.

I couldn't imagine what my life would be like, in my flat (albeit beautiful) with my 14 year old son and my cat. It dawned on me that my routine and role in church were the reasons I had been able to control my conditions, to a degree. It was soon to become apparent that the anorexia controlled me and not the other way round!

The first couple of days were surreal as I tried to take in our new “normal”. Normal was to become my 14 year old son isolating in his bedroom, as teenage boys are want to do, and my cat becoming more attached to me in eternal gratitude for having me to wait on his every need 24/7.

**“I soon realised that we would be in this for the long haul and there was nothing I could do about it”**

The came the first Friday evening in lockdown. For many years I have “lived” for Friday evenings when I head to the home of my, also divorced, best friend. We drink wine and laugh and cry together. We are like close sisters and all of a sudden our Fridays were to become very different. This is when my anxiety first took hold. I started to experience feelings of panic. How could I get through this without my best friend? Her hugs, her laughs and also our weekly “craft therapy” sessions on a Wednesday? Having someone to really share life with?

My panic only increased as it came round to Sunday. Sunday. Church service day. Time to worship and to enjoy the fellowship over a coffee after. Gone. Building firmly locked and congregation scattered to their abodes. Unthinkable.

Very early on Church set up the family service online at the usual time. I could not bring myself to join in. Friends tried to persuade me but depression had filled the gap and I told them I simply couldn’t handle it.

I found myself becoming withdrawn. I couldn’t handle this at all. As my son was home with me a new “change” happened. Lunch. Lunch happened. I don’t eat lunch. Breakfast either for that matter. Now I found I was making lunch for my son and I had to join him. If I didn’t he would inform my daughter in Paris. I don’t think he knows about my

anorexia? My daughter assured me he does.. how could I give him another reason to worry about on top of missing his routine and friends? So I introduced lunch into my new normal. This fuelled my anorexia. I could almost hear the laughter over the fact I was so weak willed. Stuck in the house AND eating lunch. “You are going to balloon” the voice laughed. “You can’t get anything right can you? You are so worthless”. Did I challenge the voice? Of course I didn’t. Cue my brain going into overdrive trying to think of ways to compensate for the extra calories. The answer came in the form of an exercise bike. Perfect! Wouldn’t even need to leave the house! The weather couldn’t prevent me from this exercise! So I started with half an hour a day... then 45 minutes.. an hour... an hour and a half.... it keeps creeping up... (I use the present tense as this is where I am now). As the exercise increases so the lunch calorie intake reduces. Then the dinner calorie content reduces..... my muscles start to hurt, my Achilles’ tendons feel stretched and painful but I must keep going.

Despite the mental torment, glimmers of hope have started to infiltrate my days. I decided I would join in the online worship after all. I spent the first three or four services in tears. To be able to see loved friends but not to be able to hug them

was very difficult . I became more depressed at the thought that everyone had a partner or other family with them and I was effectively on my own with my cat (son appearing only for food). So it was a double edged sword. The joy of the familiarity of our family communion service (even reserved some red wine and a crumb of bread for that part!), but the anxiety of not really being present.

By this point I was also starting to really look forward to my Friday evenings once more. Yes! My friend and I had cottoned on to the joy of “virtual wine evenings”! We would count the hours down until it reached 7pm when a video call would set us up for hours of chat over a worryingly large amount of wine. The only problem was that, without taxis to worry about, it would suddenly be 3am before we knew it! Naturally this meant many hours of wine. Anorexia didn’t like that. More restricting ensued in the days following each Friday night.

During these long weeks of lockdown I age tried to be brave. My relatives back in the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic didn’t have social media. They didn’t even have a tv. They must have been terrified, not knowing what was going on as relatives and friends dropped like flies. They didn’t have advice or words of comfort during their time of trial. It must have felt apocalyptic.... as indeed it has done with this Pandemic. “If they could do it then so must !!” I kept telling myself. If only.

**“How could I get through this without my best friend? Her hugs, her laughs and also our weekly “craft therapy” sessions on a Wednesday? Having someone to really share life with?”**



To social media. This has been a saviour and a burden at the same time. Good for my mental health yet bad for my mental health. I feel so conflicted. I find myself pouring over Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and even snapchat. Before I know it, three hours can have passed in the blink of an eye. I have started excitedly, anxious to absorb every photograph, video, bit of news and every joke. This has kept me going all morning! Marvellous! Half the day gone in a flash! Result! Then comes the afternoon session. I am now taking in all the family activities that have happened, the daily family walks in beautiful settings. Friends looking fresh faced. THIN. HAPPY. Why do I lack the motivation to go for a daily walk? Is it because I know my walk will be alone? Yes. That's it. I have tried to go for walks and every time I do my depression increases as I pass couples holding hands, family groups smiling, children who still want to be seen in public with their parents. The friends who are thin AND happy? How do they manage it? They eat. They are still thin. Their every thoughts are not consumed by fear of the calorie content of every morsel. They enjoy their food. I love food but I am not worthy of such pleasures. My body wobbles. It's disgusting. I can't see what my friends see. Not at all. They are happy? How can people actually be happy right now? Oh yes! They have husbands, wives, children (who want to be seen with them... unlike my own) and probably a family dog. Faithful and adoring.

So I turn off the social media and turn to the television. More Pandemic updates. More deaths. More protests. More repeats of tired shows as we gradually run out of freshly filmed material. How much more can I take?

I have now discovered a huge change in myself. Something of such epic proportions I never thought it could happen. I don't want to go out. What? Yes. Really. I have lost all motivation. It's easier to stay on the sofa, or the essential exercise bike, all day. I have become institutionalised in my own four walls. It's a beautiful world out there. Thanks but I can't be bothered to be a part of it right now. Motivation zero. I find myself playing scenes from my past over and over in my mind. Through rose tinted glasses of course. You don't develop anorexia, depression, anxiety and ptsd over a perfect life after all. Images of the past, how I saw it, leave me weeping. Literally. Large tears working their way down my sunken cheeks.

Right now there are small but meaningful changes. Tomorrow is Friday. I will not be video calling my best friend. I will be booking that taxi, buying that wine and throwing my arms round her in my new "support bubble" safe haven. A glimmer in the dark times!

I do not know when life will return to normal or even if it ever will?

We are all living this pandemic through our own eyes, in our own way. No two stories are the same. There are plenty of sad times but equally there are plenty of heartwarming stories emerging.

This is the biggest trial any of us have had to face. It is hard to be strong in these times.

For those of us who have mental health conditions and for those who go on to develop mental health issues during this time, this journey will be immensely difficult.

What will I take from this time? I am not entirely sure. I do know that anorexia is the victor, however. Exposure to so many stories and newsfeeds brimming with comments about "lockdown weight gain" and so many jokes on the subject, has left me in terror over every extra "wobbly bit". I feel sick as I regard myself in the mirror. I feel disgusted that I have allowed myself to eat those lunches and to drink too much wine. From now on I will listen to my friend anorexia. In these changing times they are a constant and therefore a bringer of comfort in this unfolding time of history...

**“I have tried to go for walks and every time I do my depression increases as I pass couples holding hands, family groups smiling, children who still want to be seen in public with their parents. ”**

# “Grief is complicated by the Covid situation”

I feel deeply affected by the pandemic. There has been a lot of stress and change and confusion. My emotions are entangled with the physical and there has been a downturn in all my areas of wellbeing.

I live alone and it's been a lonely time.

I feel let down by the government.

All these things are my truths and the only things I feel certain of...everything else has become hard to know.

**“It was awful that there could only be 10 of us there at the funeral- more could have met together that day to play golf under the guidelines”**

My Dad died - not Covid (why do I feel the need to say that every time?) but one of those 'secondary' Deaths due to the stress of lockdown and being unable to get the medical community help he had in place before Covid. My heart aches with his absence and rages against the NHS chaos that brought him no support when he really needed it - one of the generation that was grateful for any form of state healthcare and even though he was very poorly, did want to further burden the health system even though he really needed health support.

Grief is complicated by the Covid situation. Everything was delayed and restricted. It was awful that there could only be 10 of us there at the funeral- more could have met together that day to play golf under the guidelines....than could pay their last respects to my Dad. This hurts but people did their best to say goodbye and lined the streets as the hearse went by.

I have had to work full time and more through all this....and noticing how separated we are by circumstances and restrictions - some of us having to work and take risks, others having a few months off using my taxes.

I've shouted at people who don't care enough to keep their distance and I have felt shame when it's been me that forgot or got too close.

I Have felt despair and feel at times like it would be better if I wasn't here. I have felt hopeless about the future and don't have anything to look forward to. music and social times help me restore and balance but it's like without them I am disappearing - these are difficult things for me.

I've been grateful for and comforted by the love of my friends though I ache with the absence of touch in my life.

Anonymous

16 June 2020

## “The doom and gloom I felt each morning”

Since lock down started I have been working from home. My mental health has been dominated each morning on waking feeling really down and sometimes suicidal. I am really tired now after not having a day off work until today. I had to make myself take a few days off because I was being to have problems getting rid of the doom and gloom I felt each morning.

**Debbie Butler**

# “This deathly virus is not the cause of my dark inner self”

The following is a short account of dealing with anxiety. Written during the Covid-19 lockdown to help me, it may also help others. May 2020

Behind this door ...

This deathly virus is not the cause of my dark inner self, but being in ‘lockdown’ seems to make things worse, taunting my darkest feelings. I have lived alone for much more than a decade, so I should be able to adapt to these restrictions, and I thought all was well until a few days ago. It crept up on me, a sense of flatness, that feeling of lost enthusiasm and a lost sense of purpose. Inner-thoughts started to dominate my life, normal life ceased to matter and that calm, peaceful happiness left my spectrum whilst the mundane became the best feeling I could ever achieve. And those inner thoughts absorb me for hour upon hour, even days, when every spare moment will be filled with troublesome dark memories.

I find myself remembering old irrelevant thoughts from the distant past, tired old memories that no longer belong in my life, in my minds-eye, I am re-enacting tired old plays or I run old scratchy black and white videos and none of them are a true representation of past events. My mind has re-shaped a false narrative that imposes total responsibility onto my shoulders, and when you are your own greatest critic, well it all seems to make sense. So I allow those ‘tired old films’ to take a firm grip of my mind and push out normality, whatever that may be, and those negative attachments play their miserable part in a dulling and numbing experience. But I am lucky. Over the years, I have learned to recognise my dark side, I can usually sense the ebbing away of my somewhat limited self-confidence, I lose the small comfort I have come to expect where peace and calmness helps me maintain a sense of usefulness. And when I find myself here, I must call upon the support of my guide who helps me meditate, who leads me in my relaxation techniques, helping me into a meditative state where I can healthily unscramble my troublesome negative attachments, take a more balanced view of

**“It crept up on me, a sense of flatness, that feeling of lost enthusiasm and a lost sense of purpose.”**

these unsettling negative energies and to try to regain enough courage to over-power those demons that clutter my mind. So with the help of Michael, I embark upon a journey.

My meditative journey:

I never feel any sense of failure asking myself for help and I find the process of guided meditation an opportunity for healing, a chance to reset and give myself a stepping-stone to help me back to a more normal place in my mind. It’s not a magic potion, sometimes it takes a while, sometimes several journeys but I have never felt worse after practicing mindfulness. It merely leads me to a state of openness where I can gain a sense of relief, to just confront and accept that this is me and that sometimes I need a little help. Once in my comfortable, relaxing chair I soon find myself under the suggestion of meditation, soothing yet so powerful, all conquering, and soon my demons will be powerless and insignificant, no longer able to dominate my inner thoughts. The awareness of my breathing takes over as I think about my chest slowly rising as I inhale that warm air, such an automatic process but now I can celebrate every inhalation. And

then I exhale, another automatic reaction as I close off the influences of the everyday, every breath increases the sense of calm as relaxation overcomes my conscious state commanding my body to relax even deeper. Deeper and deeper. Whilst I remain conscious, I allow myself into a deeper trance, still in control, still able to awake at any moment but preferring to go deeper and deeper as each breath carries away my tensions and concerns, melting away those negative thoughts rendering them powerless.

For me the most wonderful aspect of a journey through trance is I find myself in places of joy, places I love, safe places of beauty, places I yearn for, and yet places I have never been. For they exist only in my mind but I intrinsically know I am safe and in control. And my trance-like surroundings never disappoint me. It is a warm day and I can hear the babbling of a natural spring. I have never been here yet it is familiar, I am no imposter here, this is my place and my time and without distraction, it is just for me, and this is where I belong right now. Before me I see an obvious rocky path, winding along the banks of the small cheerful stream, I take great comfort from the soothing sound as the water cascades over rocks. Along the path, step by step I explore my oasis, I'm not trespassing here, nobody else is here, this is where I belong in the safety of my mind. A sharp turn in the path and the scene opens up, the gentle slopes descend before me, flanked by trees, wild flower meadows with lush grasses, the stream hurries over small waterfalls into deeper crystal-clear pools. I continue along the path, descending steps feeling safer and deeper. I catch a brief view of me ahead, yes me, ahead, further along the path. I am dressed in different clothes, looking most comfortable and with a sheen, a protective glow surrounding me repelling all negative energies, thoughts and feelings. It feels a little strange to be observing myself ahead.

Slowly I continue, conscious of every breath, inhaling this pure air then exhaling, again sensing the rising of my chest and midriff, then my chest calmly falling ready for the next easy breath. As I observe myself ahead, it is me beyond my troubles, beyond my negative attachments, I look confident, I look like I am living the best life I could imagine, calm, safe and satisfied. I imagine me in my future, a future without anxieties, a future without trying to satisfy others, a future where I can be who I want to be, confident, calm and at peace. Looking ahead I imagine how I might feel, how I might look, how I may think and how I would be without the negative baggage that seems to consume me. I try to imagine floating forward to my new self, floating ahead to me, embracing all positive choices, all positive behaviours to enjoy a cheery position without clutter. My conscious mind is urging changes and opportunities to explore my future and help me flourish.

And so in my transcended state, I wish to clear out and cleanse myself through deep healing. Above the sound of the cascades, my voice is asking for answers, I am calling out to myself for answers. Let go! I must let go. From my meditative state I gently whisper "Let Go. Go. Let it all go". I start grasping and pulling from my heart some fictional old worn strands, filaments of old energy, pulling them from within, screwing the tired old threads into a tangled ball of fibrous residue, ushering away these negative attachments, these negative energies into my palm, ready to cast away. I look down at the residue, just a tiny mass of spent energy, a ragged old lifeless ball of frail fibres, they can't even retain form, a powerless depleting ball of rubbish. And now it is time to discard this shabby ball of negativity and everything it represents. I take a deep breath, I feel my chest rise remembering my oasis, my safety, my own inner ease. Without effort I discard the waste ball. It's gone. Gone. I brush my hands to rid any residue of dried up lifeless fibres then compose myself.

The rocky path descends further in the security of a huge rocky wall, trees and foliage form a shaded area as the path enters a tunnel, it's cooler here and darker but there is enough light to see my way. Ahead, I can see a guiding light at what seems the end of the passageway, I wave my arms to clear any cobwebs from my face and clothes as I move toward the fresher cooler air, toward the glowing light. Brighter light is spilling all around me as I edge toward a large heavy door that fills the tunnel, the door looks old, almost medieval, made of heavy oak planking with rugged iron hinges and a latch in the middle. Shafts of light beams spill over my head, along the sides of the passage engulfing me, a bright vertical line of white light issues from the central join of the two leaves lighting the space before the door. The nearer I

**“I have learned to recognise my dark side, I can usually sense the ebbing away of my somewhat limited self-confidence, I lose the small comfort I have come to expect where peace and calmness helps me maintain a sense of usefulness”**

get to the door and more is revealed, I look back and see my cast shadow drifting back down the passageway. Just a few steps from the door I can make out intricate carvings from a past age, old marks carefully hewn into the wooden planks, shapes of nature, flowers, leaves, birds and animals, I scan the carvings as my eyes find a message carved in gothic-like script. These carvings are important powerful markings, I can read the script, it spells out 'Behind this door your freedom awaits'. An orb of glowing brilliance emits from a narrow crack by the door latch, like a ball of positivity. And this is my choice, nobody cajoling me to 'buck up' or you'll be fine, just get on with it', I confidently reach forward to the heavy latch, it lifts perfectly and the swinging leaf opens, brilliant light floods over me, warm air instantly flows around me as I quietly gasp.

Into my positive world, here I can find freedom, joy, a personal sense of happiness and grace. My cloak of self-protection together with this new confidence is all I need to leave my meditation. I know this isn't a single fix but I can repeat my meditation over and over again and those negative attachments that I have clung on to for far too long will eventually diminish, giving up their negative energy and I will move on. I also know I can pass through my door as and when I feel it necessary. And one day, I won't need to 'Let go', because it will have gone and I will be free because 'my freedom awaits'.

Acknowledgement: Guiding me through my meditation is Michael Sealey, of You-Tube. I do not know Michael and he does not know me but he is an endless source of help to me. For that, I am very grateful.

**Anonymous**

29 June 2020

**“One of the things I have struggled with the most is not being able to see my dog”**

My mental health has mostly remained stable during the pandemic, although one of the things I have struggled with the most is not being able to see my dog. I now live alone, so my dog still lives with my parents, but I had always lived with pets, and dogs have been especially important sources of support for my mental health. Now that I'm able to form a 'bubble' with my parents household, I can visit my dog whenever I like, and my mental health has improved as a result.

**Anonymous**

## “I feel as though I’m in a Dystopian movie”

The whole situation has made me feel as though I’m in a Dystopian movie.

I have found that throughout the pandemic my mental wellbeing has fluctuated mostly in response to the poor handling of the crisis and the ill advised behaviour of others.

I would like to say that I am lucky. I am a Peer Support Worker at my local NHS Assessment & Treatment Service. This means I have remained working throughout the pandemic (albeit remotely) and haven’t had the worries that many others have faced with employment and income.

In some ways, I feel as though I have been preparing for this my whole life. I’m a huge fan of social distancing. I have always had a good supply of anti- bacterial wipes and hand sanitizer at home as I have always been anxious about germs, illness and others’ hand hygiene (or lack of).

**“Social distancing in shops has been a joy for me. I struggle with strangers being in my personal space and don’t understand why people have to get so close to me in queues”**

Social distancing in shops has been a joy for me. I struggle with strangers being in my personal space and don’t understand why people have to get so close to me in queues etc. This can cause me to become distressed and sometimes aggressive in public places. Not having people in my space has been liberating! The anxiety and overwhelm I felt in supermarkets had reduced to the point where I felt more able to cope.

I understand for others how hard it must have been not to be out with friends, not being able to work, having to shield or being alone and isolated.

For me, life didn’t change much at all when lockdown commenced. This probably sounds somewhat pitiful, but it has been a huge relief for me and has meant that I have managed to cope with lockdown.

I don’t go out socially very often as I have existing mental and physical health challenges which are life limiting and exhausting.

I have missed seeing my parents and grown up son, but again, I count my blessings. I live with my partner and my daughter spends half the week with us, so I haven’t been alone. I have a little dog and am lucky to be surrounded by fields and woodland and we have had some lovely walks; being limited to thirty minutes outside exercise per day pushed me to make the most of getting outside, even if I only managed a few meters!

I am in awe of the resilience and many kindnesses shown by people throughout this period.

However I am also disgusted by the behaviour of people coming out of lockdown; the tons of rubbish being left on our beaches, in our parks, in our woodlands. It was clearly shown how Mother Nature was beginning to repair during lockdowns the world over, but coming out of lockdown, nothing has changed. Also the shocking social inequality in this country has been highlighted and still, nothing will change.

But it’s ok, lockdown is easing and we’re going back to ‘normal’.

Personally I don’t want to go back to normal.....whatever that is.

**Anonymous**



# “Mud Pies, Thunder & Lightning”

Did you ever make mud pies in the garden when you were a child? There was something particularly exciting about stirring up some soil, water and old leaves in your bucket, creating a mucky, bubbly potion – giggling away at its grossness. I have no idea why we called it a pie as it was far too sloppy and definitely not edible, but it was a top-notch afternoon activity. I hope the legend of the mud pie lives on for children today, despite our new electronic toys.

**“2020 so far has pushed the boundaries of my emotional resilience and it’s been challenging”**

The last 6 months have been a mud pie. However, in this case, you can’t abandon your bucket, shut the doors, close the curtains and forget about it. You also didn’t make this mud pie – it’s somebody else’s and they spilt it in your garden. Ew. The brown slush is less hilarious when you didn’t add the flavour of fun yourself.

The ingredients of frustration, anxiety and ultimately heartbreak caused by cancer, coronavirus, racism, war, climate change, all perpetuated by a colossal disappointment in our... I would say world leaders but that seems too complimentary, so let’s say men elected to make decisions instead. It’s a revolting recipe. It’s pungent and lingering so even when you first wake up, before you’ve even opened your eyes, you can smell it. Sometimes you can taste it too and you panic because it’s getting thicker and filling your lungs with grief. You’ve got to get a glass of water to quickly wash it away.

Yesterday there was a storm. Storms are like mud pies. Exciting and a little bit magical if you let your inner 5-year-old loose but my initial reaction was to worry. Why are the Gods moving their furniture?! What’s happening now?! Is it going to rain for a lockdown and forever?! I was suddenly distracted by the lightening. It flashed across the dark sky. It looked pretty, tainted purple. Then came the roar of the skies. A deep, throaty groan that echoed through the air like a hungry bear awakening after months of hibernation. The rain pelted down, it didn’t even land on the windowsill, it was too angry and assertive. It landed straight on the ground rippling as it arrived on the soaked tarmac, and hurried down the incline like it was running late for a meeting.

I definitely didn’t feel like dancing in the rain, but it was beautiful to watch. 2020 so far has pushed the boundaries of my emotional resilience and it’s been challenging. The walls of well-being have been weathered...but they are not broken. Sure, they’re a bit less shiny than they were this time last year but they’re definitely still standing. Ugly but functional. Sometimes we need reminding that if we weren’t fragile, if we didn’t cry then we wouldn’t be real. You are complex and beautiful instead – the bricks and mortar in your mind are only metaphorical.

Then, as quickly as it started, it was all over. The ground is wet but otherwise there is no evidence of the storm. The rubbish on the street is still there, the neighbours across the road still have their window open, a car alarm is going off somewhere in the distance. Not close enough to be annoying, but close enough to be heard. The clouds have passed and the sky is blue again. Not bright, vivacious blue but pastel, wallflower blue. The same but different. Somehow it all looks a little bit fresher, litter included. The air is lighter too. Just like we will be when we come out the other end of whatever you, he, she, I or they are going through.

The same but fresher. Hopefully wiser. Certainly still loved and maybe even more grateful. We will make a toast and the bubbles will be that much bubblier and the strawberry on the glass that much sweeter because healing is inevitable and if you don’t have anyone to heal with, please know you can heal with me. We can make a mud pie.

## “To the supermarket in early March”

Milton Keynes

Is where they decided to construct an ice rink morgue

Easier building to convert

(Ever since we met you had a hold on me)

I limit the news to the morning time

leave the marigolds on the side

and count 4 plastic bags into my pocket

It could be worse

0.3 miles Open Until 10pm

My hands stay cold when I take

the ice cream out of the large freezer

that stretches across the wall

Aisle 9

Thankful that I have 2 pots already at home

I didn't bulk buy

I just don't eat ice cream that often

(You started something can't you see

Ever since we met you had a hold on me)

13 was the youngest

Now 5 years old

Doubling of new cases every 4 days

Quarantine for 7 with symptoms

14 for the whole household

2 paracetamol 4 times a day

Take as needed

(I only know I never want to let you go)

(I don't know what it is that makes me love you so)

I don't know when this will end

I make a note in my phone

Of the songs that are playing in the supermarket

Don't worry be happy

and I only want to be with you Is the music louder than normal?

Or do we all just stand silently obeying,

muffled and shuffling past the mozzarella

I don't wear a mask

In accordance with guidelines

Some do

Others have scarfs placed over

their mouths and nose,

casual

Clutching his trolley, a man stands

at the entrance to the supermarket, a mask,

dangling under his chin

(It could be worse

I could be living under a fucking bridge)

The man he directs his thoughts to gives a gentle

nod and a weak smile

2 meters apart

It doesn't matter where you go or what you do

I proceed to the cantaloupes

**“I limit the news to the morning time  
leave the marigolds on the side  
and count 4 plastic bags into my pocket  
It could be worse”**

3 August 2020

## “I couldn’t go to my local cafe”

At first [my mental health] suffered greatly the issue that I couldn’t freely walk about it go to my local cafe for a coffee which is almost a daily ritual was and did have a big downer effect on me however due to the fact that a big worry for me was getting Coronavirus being home on my own I became less stressed and more at ease with my confinement.

Mark Dale

# “As food was pulled from the shelves, and exercise was limited outside, I was afraid”

Life as we know it has completely changed and we have seen so much change, turmoil and uncertainty over the last few months. We have seen an increase in the number of people struggling, the negative effects of the pandemic on so many, grief, loneliness amongst debt and employment issues. People who perhaps have been highly functioning with a mental illness for years and the virus and life changing brought it in to a place where things were just too much. But you all know this and we can all think about it like this. Thinking someone else has it worse so we shouldn't be talking. Thinking not about ourselves but about the impact it has had on those around us, whilst knowing deep down things have been hard.

As I sit here and write I feel slightly guilty that I am taking this time to think about me and my wellbeing in this all. It sounds ridiculous as I work full time campaigning on mental health, talking about it and encouraging others to speak up. For me the lockdown can be broken down in to parts, none of them have beaten me and I know I will get through them all stronger but they have been challenging.

I heard a talk by Rick Warren at the start of lockdown and he summed it up perfectly “We are all in the same storm but in different boats”, so right now I want to invite into my boat.

I live in a small one bed flat with my boyfriend. We have a small garden and a fair amount of green space close by. And as lockdown began I felt lucky that I had this space but what I didn't realise were for the first few weeks, cracks were about to come out in my recovery.

**“I know what my coping mechanisms are, but they don't prepare you for how to deal with a pandemic”**

## Part 1: The First Few Weeks

I came out of hospital 12 years ago and have been managing my recovery from anorexia in a really good way. I know what I need to do stay well, I know what my coping mechanisms are, but what they don't prepare you for how to deal with a pandemic. Probably quite understandable in hindsight but as the food was pulled from the shelves, as our exercise was limited outside, as the number of people sharing their home workouts on Instagram increased, and as my work slowly stopped I was afraid. I hated the pandemic, I hated how it was making me feel and I hated how out of control I felt. I was stuck feeling trapped, and then the trauma re-emerged. I was angry so much at those around me, fearful of getting sick again and trying so hard to not let the eating disorder suck me back in. She told me that she would give me that control, numb those feelings that I hadn't felt for ages and that I didn't want to feel. I knew I had to act fast to stop these feelings, to get rid of them from my head! I wrote lists for each day of what I was going to do, I limited my time on social media, and I made sure my therapy was able to go remote. Back to the basics felt hard but it was okay and I kept telling myself it's fine as I am in a pandemic. I began to speak up about this too, one of the reasons I did this, I think, looking back, was because I wanted others to know how hard it was. How difficult it felt for not just me but for other people with eating disorders. Life was tough but there were things we could all do to help alleviate that pressure.

## Part 2: Going into full on fixing mode and settling in to lockdown

I decided I needed some projects to do to help keep me busy so set up some groups online to offer support to others who were struggling. This allowed me to take my mind off things a bit, whilst at the same time selfishly served a purpose for me reminding me that I had to stay well.

The weeks turned in to months, and life was strange but continued. Different crazes swept the internet, new things for people to stress about or dare I say it “moan” about. It was okay, and getting easier as I settled in to the day to day of life. I made sure I was getting up at the same time each day, moving because I wanted not to punish myself and talking about how I felt.

The zoom calls got to me though! I have never found it easy looking in the mirror and when you are faced with zoom calls all day and then zoom parties in the evening, the pressure to look a certain way was mounting. The reality was I would spend my zoom calls looking at myself. Sound vain or like a first world problem? But for me identifying this was so important as it allowed me to move forward again, readjusting my coping mechanisms.

I know I haven't always been the easiest during lockdown and have had a few days where I have cried, shouted and been so intensely angry at my boyfriend. It has been hard for him seeing that side of me, one which for me felt so out of control but together we have grown in it.

### **Part 3: Lockdown easing**

And now as lockdown eases things start to feel maybe slightly easier in some places, the long walks down the River Thames, to sitting in restaurants again. My mood feels more level at times, but hard at others. I feel guilty for those who are still shielding and for those who feel afraid to go out. I have re-thought my priorities but am still processing and grieving for things that I lost this year. The pressure that I put on going to Australia to spend time with my Godmother to walk and talk, realising that I have lost opportunities but at the same time realising I am learning to grow and learning to find more about myself.

I am nervous about the aftermath that when things settle and life restores that there will be people lost in this never ending trauma. People who have tried to be strong for so long but perhaps now are lost and feeling alone.

I am juggling the throwaway comments about weight and diet culture. I know that the anorexia is lurking trying to pounce on me. She is there in the diet programs on the TV at the forefront of the Government's obesity strategy, jumping for joy at their fixation on calorie counting. But it isn't just me I am worried about – it's the millions of others

around the world and it is this that frustrates me the most at the moment. But for me it still feels hard at times. I have put this pressure on myself to be strong and to be okay, occasionally letting people see another side of me, but right now it is about staying well and focusing on those positive things. Focussing on actually how proud I am of myself that I survived lockdown, that I didn't go to a gym for months.

Maybe as a nation we will never be the same and I still don't know if people will be better for what has happened. I know for me, I am fearful of the judgment, not just in appearance but when I am on a train travelling, looking at those around me who have no mask on, and yes some people have their reasons but the fear still grips me.

Life as we know it has changed, and as we start to go back to the new normal I can't help but feel nervous. I have enjoyed my gym re-opening but have this fear that things will shut down again. I am struggling to realise I cannot fix everyone who may have felt some sort of pain in this time but will continue to speak up and I urge you to do the same because these conversations could be the lifeline for someone else.

**“I am nervous about the aftermath that when things settle and life restores that there will be people lost in this never ending trauma”**

## “My husband is in a care home”

My husband is in a care home with Picks dementia, in February he recognised me held bits of conversation may have been repetitive but still talked at the end of February I had to go into hospital and went home on the 11 March on the 13 March his home went into lockdown we were promised regular video links which rarely happened that one Friday received a call to say I could garden visit for an hour, I was walking on cloud nine! the following day I arrived no one knew what they were doing did not have a key to the garden I did catch sight of him for a few second the next week had a call to say garden visits would not go ahead. They have now started to allow window visits originally for an hour then it was cut to 20 minutes whatever days you wanted then on the 24 July I received a letter saying that residents will be allowed one 20 minute visit a week (not must when there are 10,080 in a week). We have been married for 36 years and together for 40, now he does not recognise me looks lost and confused has to be assisted with all of his meals in February he was still able to feed himself with odd occasions when he needed help. I had hoped that with regular visits 4/5 times a week he would get comfortable with me but with just 20 minutes I do not know if he will ever remember me or be comfortable with me. In fact he has not spoken to me since 2 May on one of the rare video calls. He has deteriorated so much in such a short period of time it is heart breaking whilst I know dementia is not a curable illness the rapid deterioration has been awful. One day perhaps they will allow us proper visiting at the end of the day I would be less risk to their staff and residents as I live alone and work from home, than they agency staff the home constantly use. It is so hard to see such a caring loving person who I have spent most of my life looking lost and hurt. Whilst I know dementia is a “one way street” I had not expected such a rapid deterioration in the man I love and will always love. He is only 64 now and was diagnose at the age of 55, in fact he is 6 weeks younger than me and its hard

**“It is so hard to see such a caring loving person who I have spent most of my life looking lost and hurt”**

## “Too much time to think”

That's it! Too much time to think, alone, reflecting on the past, bringing it in to the present. No access to healthcare professionals unless I had Covid 19. Even then it was a masked person muttering at me. Certainly not interested in mental health. “You are lucky to be alive,” she said. Lucky? Me? 77 years old with Bipolar and other nasty physical things. Isolated for four months - nightmares re-emerging. 7 years old again. That's when it all began. Years of abuse mentally and physically. I never fully realised it before these long days of isolation. I had to do something about it and I did. Sharing my story with a colleague and then many days of recollection and finding evidence. It goes on and whatever the outcome I have an overwhelming sense of relief, achievement.

**“No access to healthcare professionals unless I had Covid 19. Even then it was a masked person muttering at me. Certainly not interested in mental health”**

Then the depression. Hours of alone-ness. Became obsessed with chat rooms and paid for the company of others in far off lands. Hundreds of pounds. I bought a ticket to Malaysia and cancelled the next day. Still trying to get a refund. Now I am angry with myself. Venting my rage on others. Needing urgent help. Crisis. GP surgery closed. Incredible? How can the doctor not work at this time? To protect himself no doubt. What can I do. OK I will double the mood stabiliser and see what happens. Now I am more crazy. Aggressive impossible to live with myself. I don't want to die I don't want to live.

Doctors are back - sort of - telephone call only. What good is that. I change GP. Real people - I don't hate them - now I have pills to help me sleep and referral back to the Psych. She has been transferred and I will get a new one. Oh God do I have to tell the 77 years of history again. Seems my NHS records have been shredded. Only most recent available. OK. I write a summary of the misery of my life. Leave out the few good bits. Realise how much I dislike Psychiatrists and how useless they have been. I prefer RD Laing. Not the ECT and modified insulin. Anyone remember that? New phone Psych arrives. Dr. Daisy. Love the name. She sounds nice. We are getting on well and have a crisis system set up. I can't see that the NHS of the future will be right for people like me. I never got on with the Samaritans.

No I am getting bored with this. The spell check can't spell and it's making me depressed. I am glad I took the opportunity to let it out. At least one benefit of Covid 19.

# “People, like locusts, stripped the supermarket shelves of everything they could get”

## The News Harvester

The night away in Edinburgh had been a great escape, but before leaving, I wandered into a huge souvenir shop to pick up some family gifts. I panicked when I saw two Asian ladies in masks. Did they know something I didn't? Feeling very hot and stuffy in a very large shop was a strange feeling! My heart started racing and I felt trapped. As I rushed quickly outside the shop, I gasped in the cool air. I was shaking! I quickly realised, as a mental health nurse of 35 years, that I was having my first ever panic attack. It seems I was afraid of the face masks.

On the way home, we stopped off to visit family. My new baby grandson was asleep, so I didn't get to cuddle him – crucial, as it turns out. We excitedly planned Easter, which is always a huge celebration in our home.

I dispelled thoughts that Easter may not happen for us this year. . .

The following days, I struggled with work. The more I heard about Coronavirus, the more I checked the News on the radio, TV, online, but I checked... and checked... and then some more. My sleep was beginning to suffer.

I live in a small town, but I had to drive 35 miles to deliver mental health training to new NHS staff. They were a brilliant group, thoroughly engaging in the session. I made a joke of coughing people, asking if they'd travelled to Italy or China.

Then it happened. I felt ill. I had a headache I just couldn't shake for several days. I was exhausted with temperature of 38.7C and I knew it couldn't be flu, because I'd been vaccinated against it. I panicked. I cried. I have severe asthma and now I knew I'd die.

After a week of self-isolation in my bedroom, I fed my anxiety even more.

My mood plummeted. What was the point of getting up to have a shower, only to stay in my 4 walled prison? I was exhausted. I slept so much. I only had a tiny cough, nothing much. I couldn't cope any longer with being trapped in a bedroom, where I couldn't even see people walking by! I took the decision to leave my room and go downstairs, where my other half sat as far as possible away from me.

We tried to buy some shopping online but couldn't get a delivery. We hadn't bought any food for over 3 weeks now. Lockdown came in. People, like locusts, stripped the supermarket shelves of everything they could get, especially pasta and toilet rolls, but we couldn't go out. We were self isolating.

I hadn't died! Had I had Covid19? I didn't know. Later, an antibody test would prove I hadn't had it.

My brain worked overtime to find answers to questions I repeatedly generated.

I spent waking hours harvesting News. From the moment I awoke, until the moment I fell asleep, I absorbed all the news

**“What was the point of getting up to have a shower, only to stay in my 4 walled prison?”**



I could find. Wuhan – how could a place I'd never heard of, strike terror into my heart? I'd said back in January that this virus would become a pandemic, but I was ridiculed. Well, if I'd been right about that, I'd reasoned that surely I'd also be right with my fear that it would kill millions of us in the UK.

I still couldn't get any shopping delivered, so I cleared the shelves at home of 4 year old tins of pilchards, tuna, lentils and pasta! The local Polish shop delivered biscuits and cakes we'd never tried before. The food was outstanding and full of flavour. I'd developed a new passion – FOOD! I say new passion, but I've struggled with my weight yo-yoing for about 45 years. I'd recently lost a lot of weight and had become very fit and healthy, going to the gym daily. Lockdown put an end to that. Over the next few months, I ate my way through anything and everything I could get my hands on. I started to feel physically uncomfortable. My legs were always hurting.

**“How can you admit to feeling guilty, exhausted, demotivated, depressed and fearful, when your colleagues are out there, day in, day out, wearing restrictive and frequently uncomfortable PPE?”**

Then I got a shielding letter. The terror of not having had one in the first round of letters was horrifying, but here it was. I managed to get one supermarket to deliver food to us. I included biscuits, crisps, high sugar and high fat content food. I even included wine. I rarely touched alcohol. In rubber gloves, I wiped every single item with disinfectant cloths before quarantining them for 4 days.

My descent into a 3 stone weight gain was a tasty one, filled with cakes, bread, pies, pasties and pizza. I was soon glugging alcohol every Friday night. Before long, I thought it would be okay to drink on a Thursday night too. Those fruity gins are nice! For some reason though, I choose to drink them with diet tonic water. Why waste calories?

Work. Oh yes! Work! Well I was working from home. How exciting to see colleagues online! Ah I could do this shielding lark. As soon as work was finished, I had a large G&T waiting to cheer me up, and a delicious meal. Working from home was good, surely? I didn't have to face Covid19, apart from watching the News and following it on my phone. I also checked the daily world statistics. The trouble was, I knew my colleagues were donning full PPE and working on the frontline, so how could I feel happy at home? Guilt crept in, but gin and crisps helped me cope in the evenings.

The empty gin and wine bottles were building up, along with my weight. I wanted to go for a walk, but Boris said I had to stay home. So I stayed home. My weight increased. The shielding was keeping me alive, wasn't it?

Shielding and working from home is tough. Whilst not taking anything away from those braving the now familiar 'frontline' and everyday work, this is all too often a forgotten or group in hiding. How can you admit to feeling guilty, exhausted, demotivated, depressed and fearful, when your colleagues are out there, day in, day out, wearing restrictive and frequently uncomfortable PPE? Yet this is true. So many shared their stories with me, with which I can associate, as I' also shielding and working from home. I'd like to reinforce that it really is okay to not be okay. Let me share a few thoughts....

I had a meltdown last month. I have struggled to get a supermarket order until very recently, so imagine my absolute delight when I could order a new, fancy frying pan from a supermarket to be delivered along with my weekend breakfast items! I was so giddy! No more ruined sausages or eggs! I even ordered a few extra items just to get a cheap delivery. Just a few hours before it was due, I received notification that my frying pan wasn't in stock. Normally, this wouldn't be an issue. BUT IT IS! I can't go out and buy one! So, instead of shopping at that A-word online retailer, I emailed the supermarket to explain my disappointment at not getting a frying pan. Imagine my reaction at their reply: "please return the item to our store for a refund". SERIOUSLY? How can I return something they haven't delivered?! Instead of laughing, I became very angry. I asked if they were taking the mess! All emotional intelligence went out of the window in one fell swoop. Small things were becoming very meaningful.

This week, someone said that they experience the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, with very little in between. I was baffled! Then I got it! That excitement when an online order arrives (notice I avoided the A word), or when we see a social media post of our loved ones laughing. That heartbreaking moment when you realise you've lost 6 months of hugs,

cuddles and time with your loved ones. Mother's Day, Easter, Father's Day, holidays, Formula One, football. That moment when you can't go to your loved one's funeral. There are too few in-betweens to fire up many other emotions, so you start to feel the same, day in, day out. You used to look forward to weekends, but the only thing you've got to look forward to is a day without the laptop – that isn't so, but it feels like that sometimes. You start to catastrophise and become annoyed far too easily....

The sheer frustration of Microsoft Teams not working, or of having to stumble from one meeting to the next without so much as a moment away from the laptop. Bad backs, aching knees, shoulders, arms, all of those places that aren't used to working such long hours at a table or chair that weren't made to be worked at for long. How can you complain when your colleagues are in a really bad place in PPE? So you don't.

You start to think that because you're working from home, you should be proving you're working hard, so you put in even more hours than you usually would. You'll justify your role one way or the other, and you'll prove to your manager or team that you're working, so you take less breaks (is that possible?). Before you know it, you're spending hours longer doing much less, because you're burning yourself out. Wow. How did that happen when you're only working from home?

Home. Suddenly, it doesn't feel like home! Your office is your lounge or conservatory. Your dining table is your workspace. You haven't got a table so you're struggling. Reclaim that space! It is still your home, but now I'm tidying things away after work, so that I can't see them. Lines become blurred. Social media is no longer just for home life, you've joined the wonderfully supportive staff group online. People contact me out of hours through it, not just through my work email. This wonderfully supportive group becomes intrusive, as well as a brilliant, supportive and interesting place – truly interesting. I put boundaries in place. No more Sunday check ins.

If I hear "THE NEW NORMAL" just one more time..... Initially, I'm happy for those of you that aren't shielding, because you can mix with others, but that doesn't last as well as I'd like. People are now able to eat out and mix in bubbles, but I can't get into a bubble because everyone has already made their own whilst I've been busy shielding! Loneliness and feeling sorry for yourself soon creeps in. How could I be lonely when I'm not at home alone. My other half, furloughed since March, is now redundant. He'll never work again. He's old enough to retire early. Now I find myself in that bracket where I'm working all the hours... and he's relaxing (I doubt it with my constant whinging, but I like to think I'm right – the martyr effect!). Emotions run high. Ohhh the amount of people that have looked at their loved ones with resentment would be funny, if only it weren't so true. Admit it. Accept it. Let it go....

He now likes a glass of wine in the evenings, but I've started saying no. I don't want to drink. It isn't special anymore, it isn't just something I have on birthdays and special occasions anymore, so I'm not really bothered about a drink. With absolute horror, shielding has ended, but I'm still shielding. I've started to go for walks. Socially isolated walks.

My son won't let me cuddle my grandson, because I'm clinically severely vulnerable and "the virus hasn't disappeared", so he informs me. He doesn't want to put his son at any increased risk. Neither do I, but if I don't get a hug soon, I wonder if these daily tears will dry up...

The News says we're entering a second spike in Europe....

There's no way I'm going into a supermarket!

I still haven't got my frying pan though!

**“People are now able to eat out and mix in bubbles, but I can't get into a bubble because everyone has already made their own whilst I've been busy shielding!”**

**MariaPaola Ditch**

# “No person is an island”

No Person Is An Island – Though The Past Few Months Have Made Us All Feel Like We are.

The events of the past few months have, to use a word that the media near enough wore out in the early days of the pandemic, have been unprecedented. Everything we thought we knew about the world has been tipped on end, that is true for nations and individuals alike.

At least it is up to a point, look beyond the surface and another picture can be discerned. History, even in those moments when it blind-sides us, has as many layers as an onion.

The pandemic has shown us the inequalities that lurk under the shiny surface of even the richest countries. In the age of consumption, when who we are is defined by what we have, everybody to a greater or lesser extent lives on credit.

That is all well and good, until the day the debt is called in and we find out we lack the means to pay.

## “The pandemic has shown us the inequalities that lurk under the shiny surface of even the richest countries”

The same is true of individuals on an emotional level, we have lived high on the hog of shallow surface esteem and neglected the dull budgeting necessary for survival. That debt was called in by the isolation forced on most of us in the first months of the pandemic.

I had, in a limited way, some experience of this myself. At the start of lockdown I imagined that it wouldn't have much impact on me. After all I'd always enjoyed my own company, it would just be a matter of hunkering down with a stack of books.

My overconfident assessment of things was proved quickly and decisively wrong. On a practical level I was able to entertain myself and had the good fortune to have been, somewhat spuriously, named as a keyworker and so wasn't trapped in the

house all the time.

On a deeper level, linked to the nebulous but vital concept of our wellbeing it showed me something I had always taken pains to ignore; the extent of my own loneliness.

I am not without 'friends', or perhaps that should be acquaintances, people I know from work, or the pub, or any one of a dozen other things that I do. None of these people though enter into the category of friendship where you can let down your guard and reveal your weaknesses.

Perhaps its a 'man thing', certainly I was raised in a culture where until recently even admitting to having feelings, let alone experiencing them was actively discouraged. It goes beyond that though, modern culture encourages us to show only the best, most photogenic side of our lives with social media as the electronic shop window in which it is displayed.

Loneliness, anxiety, sadness that can't be mended by buying something shiny is messy and so has to be covered up. Only current circumstances mean we can no longer do so so easily.

The question is will what we have all experienced change things in some way that makes it easier to admit to the mess behind the curated image of our lives? It would be nice to think so, but I fear that it won't.

Human beings are programmed to seek stability, things have been thrown massively off track by the pandemic and our natural reaction will be to get back to normal as soon as possible. Even if the normal in question was not entirely real to begin with.

**Adam Colclough**

**3 September 2020**

**“Isolation came as no shock”**

Surprisingly isolation from others during the pandemic came as no shock. My past mental distress had given me practice in being separate from others. This could be because of other people's reactions to my distress, or my chosen solitude.

**Stephanie Shaw**

**“A friend suggests we go for a walk, fully masked. I am so touched to see her that I weep uncontrollably”**

*I hunker down, face my fear, and  
Peer into my inside world, and  
Thoughts of death and love and you  
Fall from my mind like flags unfurled*

It's May or June, I'm not sure which, and I am pacing around the flat which I have left rarely since late March. My cough has stopped but my taste and smell are still playing tricks. I keep myself occupied, as best I can, with varying success. I catch myself muttering to myself as I check how little food I have left, or scour supermarket websites – no deliveries, I surmise, until Christmas. I count bags of pasta in the cupboard and rifle through the freezer. I have enough food, for now.

I decide to order an Indian take away, again, and justify the expenditure by reminding myself of how much I am saving on tube fares to work, coffees en route, sandwich lunches. I want the same as last time and the app does all the work – chicken bhuna, bhindi bhaji, sag aloo. It won't be long. I wonder if I should get dressed for the delivery man (it is always the same guy). He usually leaves it on the front step, presses the bell, jumps back on his scooter and is off. I shout after him, 'thank you!', but he's gone. The world is getting ever stranger.

**“The death of George Floyd has caught all our imaginations and fury, and I can't help but wonder if part of the reason we are so animated is because in lockdown white people are finally beginning to understand, in some small way, what living with limited liberty feels like”**

I can't quite remember when I last wore anything other than jogging bottoms and a hoodie, or got a haircut, or for that matter, took a shower. I resemble a recluse, which is not far off the mark; I am certainly starting to feel like one. My nephew, on a rare video call appearance, says my grey-white beard makes me look like Father Christmas.

I pick up books and pens and then put them down again. I committed to write a 4 line poem everyday – as a way of maintaining my mental health and capturing the mood – but my enthusiasm and ability ebb and flow. I start crosswords and don't finish them. I read newspapers on my laptop but seldom get past the second paragraph.

For fun, I buy books on line. And they come thick and fast. Spending money, a remnant activity from before lockdown, liberates me somehow, brings a kind of frisson, joy. Sometimes I am so excited that I forget which books I have bought and end up with two. I have double copies of Adam Rutherford's brilliant new book, *How to Argue with a Racist*, and wonder which of my friends might like it.

I talk to them on Zoom. Several express an interest. The death of George Floyd has caught all our imaginations and fury, and I can't help but wonder if part of the reason we are so animated is because in lockdown white people are finally beginning to understand, in some small way, what living with limited liberty feels like.

*That Sunday, last summer, in the garden, in the quiet  
Your arm across my chest, breath on my neck, sunburnt  
It's the spaces between the notes, you said, that make the music  
And now I miss them, our silences, the closeness, you*

I flick quickly through channels stopping only for news – which is depressingly consistent – or when someone catches my eye, a fleeting compensation for having exited social media dating sites as part of the anti-COVID war effort. Being in lockdown has not diminished my libido, of that I am certain, but all possibility of it being satisfied is obliterated.

Outside of Soho and its numerous opportunities for spending, I am not convinced that the gay community was really ever a thing, but I haven't seen a gay man in weeks and its starting to smart. I yearn for a glance, an acknowledgement, maybe even a shared joke. Anything else is off the cards.

I read that internet porn use has gone through the roof and sexual health clinics are expecting a downturn in infections, a silver lining of sorts. I am reminded of my grandmother, who whenever she went shopping with limited means always replied to shop assistants in the same way. 'Thank you, dear', she'd say, 'but I'm just browsing'.

Don't misunderstand me, my lockdown life is full of people. My days are spent on video calls for meetings at work. Contact with friends is more regular than ever. We use an ever-growing number platforms to meet, and chat, in ones, twos or more. My WIFI connection is intermittent, and whilst videoing brings an intimacy of sorts, it also provides the perfect opportunity to retreat.

When a conversation loses its appeal, or my anxiety takes over, or I can't tolerate other people for a second more, I squint a bit, grimace a bit, tap my ears quite dramatically, and shout, 'I can't hear you' and end the call. My craving for company is equalled only by my desire to retreat ever further into my COVID gloom.

*These feelings slither, creep into my dreams,  
Puncture my hope, my everyday me  
And quietly suggest life is not as it seems,  
So I stick to the rules because I want to be free*

I'm not a terribly sociable person. At least, I'm not anymore. I used to be, a thousand years or so ago, or more maybe, when I drank. In those days, long gone now, I was always with somebody, in some bar or club, at a party, somewhere, out, away from home, away from myself.

I hung out with people, friends or strangers, being sociable, drinking, until my words became slurred, opinions swelled, and inhibitions diminished. The company inevitably dwindled, as they called time on their drinking, went back to their partners and families, their self-respect intact, and I returned home, to struggle with my keys at the door, open yet another bottle, and climb into bed, or stay slumped on the sofa.

Nowadays, in lockdown, I see very few people in person. I haven't seen anyone I know – except for the nice woman in the corner shop – for weeks. And if the truth be known, I'm struggling. Video calls colleagues, friends and family do not compensate.

I feel a kind of loneliness that seeing people on screen doesn't seem to ease. It's far more existential, somehow; it dwells in the bones of me, in my DNA. I feel like a non participant observer in a dysfunctional world and whilst I acknowledge that non participation is keeping me safe, it is giving oxygen to a consuming sense of disconnection.

**“I feel a kind of  
loneliness that seeing  
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DNA”**

Being in lockdown is like being in active addiction. Feelings that I haven't really experienced since the beginning of my recovery start to return: a sense of uncertainty; a descending darkness. I never quite know the day or the time. My sleep is broken, my dreams tormented. I have an abiding feeling that something terrible is about to happen. They're all there, the demons, in the ether, threatening my mental health, threatening my sobriety. Lockdown has resuscitated them.

A friend suggests we go for a walk, fully masked, and stay 7 feet apart. We plot a route that encompasses wide pavements and quiet streets. I am so touched to see her that I weep uncontrollably. 'I wish I could give you a hug', she says.

*She calls late and I know straight away  
That something's not right  
The end is close, she says, he'll be gone by  
Dawn. I love you, I say. Sleep tight.*

A friend from University has died. She was in her mid 50s. I am very sad and cry on the phone. Her funeral will be live streamed. A week later, my uncle dies. We follow the service on Zoom. I just want to see people, talk to them, check they're OK. I wonder how we are supposed to grieve.

I sit, alone, swearing at the TV when politicians say they are doing their best, really, and any mistakes - it is certainly implied, if not said out loud - are due to the weakness of the citizenry. Our stupidity and inability to decipher the doublespeak are the real problems here, they assure us, not a government too idle to respond, or an enfeebled infrastructure struggling to keep up.

Racism and victim blaming are starting to percolate through - if only people weren't black or Asian, so damn fat, poor, or old - they wouldn't be such a burden on the rest. I can't help but think about HIV in the 80s and 90s when the press and the establishment went to town, blaming gay men for what they trumpeted as a deviant misery of their own making.

**“HIV/AIDS took hold of our friends and lovers and killed them, brutally, violently. That pandemic changed our identities and our politics, as gay men, our relationships and aspirations”**

I wonder what it would be to have leaders who could bring us together, not triumph through fear. We are at war with the virus, the MP on the telly tells me, at war with ourselves, with each other. And each day the death toll is mounting.

*I eat here, read here, work here  
Sleep here, mishear, weep here  
I sit here and I fear here  
But I am here. Still.*

These times are unprecedented. I know that because everybody says it. And I yearn for 'precedented' times, but struggle to remember when there ever was such a thing. And we have never lived through a pandemic before, we are told, which helps make sense of the mess they're making, but actually, it's not true.

We have never lived through such a medical catastrophe, for sure, where the health service is under such huge pressure, where we are locked inside our houses, connecting with our neighbours on Thursday evenings, when we each stand on our front steps, clap, blow whistles and bang frying pans with wooden spoons for care workers. We have not had to face something of this scale before.

But some of us - in fact, many in my social circle, myself included - have lived through a pandemic before. In truth, we are living through a pandemic still. HIV/AIDS took hold of our friends and lovers and killed them, brutally, violently. That pandemic changed our identities and our politics, as gay men, our relationships and aspirations. The mothers who lost

their sons and the men who lost their lovers still bear its consequences, day in, day out.

The people we know and love with HIV today are part of the same pandemic. They dutifully take their antiretrovirals every day and will do for the rest of their lives. Yet still they face stigma; still they fear for the future. Perhaps what politicians mean is that this is the first pandemic in living memory that has affected white heterosexuals - which even then ignores the many IV drug users who lost their lives.

I am reminded of something I learnt a long time ago: pandemics are scientific and social facts, but the way they are managed and described, can also reflect and exacerbate deep divides in society.

*So I shave my head, and tidy my socks  
And cling onto the hope that it will all be fine  
But deep down deep I know it will change  
Because everything does, in life, in time*

Everything has blurred in lockdown. The world is changing, and I am changing with it, but the two processes feel out of synch. I don't know where we're heading, any of us. And the uncertainty is hard to manage. But I am trying to do the things that I know keep me well: reach out to family and friends, stay in the moment, hold onto my values.

We will look back and see this as a period of huge social and personal upheaval, I am certain. We will remember all the pain, the sadness and the losses, including the thousands of preventable deaths. And I will be reminded of how fortunate I am to have survived.

**David Woodhead**



21 September 2020

## “2020 was going to be different”

As the fireworks burst into the sky on a close of another year, I promised myself I would try harder. Try harder to meet someone, ‘put myself out there’ to go on many more dates with nice boys.

**“before they could  
turn into anything...  
Covid hit, pulling the  
biggest prank on the  
lives of the single  
and ready to mingle”**

I had been single for 3 years and always had a bad track record of picking the worst people imaginable. It was a running joke among my work friends. But, 2020 was going to be different.

it started so well... 2 dates in January and Feb, both nice, not the love of my life, but nice. Then before they could turn into anything...

Covid hit, pulling the biggest prank on the lives of the single and ready to mingle. Dating apps turned into desperate places for sexting and frustration. The anxiety of the single, grew immensely. Facing life and death alone. More & more rules, taking away freedom and love stories - no household mingling, no meet ups. Dates became video calls and walks in the park (which hardly happened) people preferred to close themselves away. To Hide from the impending risk outside their doors.

I found a loneliness in not sharing this pandemic with anyone. Facing it alone and afraid.

**Anonymous**

## “Over by Christmas”

The first intimation of trouble comes when my manager phones me on my mobile, at home, at around 9.30 pm. “You’re on the at-risk list,” she says, “so you need to be working from home from now on.” What puts me on that list is my Type 2 diabetes; the other conditions I have, which are not so visible (but which will be as challenging to cope with) are my fibromyalgia, depression and social anxiety. A week later, the Prime Minister addresses us all, telling us that we are in full lockdown and that we must stay indoors unless shopping for food or medicines, any medical need, or one set of exercise a day.

Every moment for the next few months after that is full of anxiety. I get very little sleep that night, going over what this is likely to mean. It’s not just me I have to think about, as I live with (and am a carer for) my elderly mother. The following day, I check our stores of food and medicines and calculate roughly how long we could last with our existing supplies. I always keep some stocks, in case either of us is too ill to go out. The situation is not desperate, but our meagre cache will not last very long.

My extended family, who I would normally turn to in times of crisis, have problems of their own. Two of them are on the shielding list and the third is trying to provide care for the other two, so I don’t want to add to his workload. One neighbour delivers a note with her phone number on to offer us help, but the rest ignore us.

The first challenge is trying to work from home at the same time as dealing with the practicalities of lockdown. When are food shops likely to be quietest, and what happens if that is right in the middle of my working day? My employer is flexible, luckily, but the pressure is still huge to juggle the conflicting demands on my time. My appetite disappears. In the first week, I lose two pounds in weight.

Mum and I have both had a Will and Power of Attorney set up for some time, so we have already had the conversations about our healthcare wishes should we be in a position not to make them known. The expectation was that, in the normal scheme of things, she would die first and would leave everything to me. Now there is a real chance of that order being reversed, or of us both dying at a similar time. I write a set of instructions for our executor, apologising that things may be messy if I have not had time to clear things up, and e-mail that to her in case she has any questions. I look at my possessions in a different light now – I resolve that I need to let go of stuff that I am keeping, that I no longer have any use for. I make a start on clearing things and sorting things into bags, but realise that as all the charity shops are closed, there is nowhere to dispose of them, so I give it up.

My fibromyalgia and social anxiety mean that I have little in the way of social life, so I do not immediately notice the Government-enforced removal of it. My only feeling about the removal of social contact is that maybe other people might now understand what life is like for me – to not be able to go out (even though you may want to) and to be afraid of other people in a social environment. What has changed is that the safety net that made my disability easier to cope with has now disappeared – it is impossible to get a supermarket delivery, and taxis are at a premium. Getting food now means a long wait, queuing in a wind-swept car park, and there are no guarantees that what you want will be available when you get into the store – panic buyers have stripped the

**“The first challenge is trying to work from home at the same time as dealing with the practicalities of lockdown. When are food shops likely to be quietest, and what happens if that is right in the middle of my working day?”**

shelves, and there is no priority for the old and vulnerable. I am prescribed paracetamol as a treatment for fibromyalgia, and pre-lockdown the NHS had suggested I start and buy my own to save it money. Now, you cannot buy paracetamol over the counter anywhere, so it is a godsend that my prescriptions for it are still allowed. I used to have a sense of security, that I could manage the necessary things. Now that feeling of control has completely gone, and I am unsettled and unnerved.

I watch the news and search the internet for instruction. I realise there is little chance of setting up the recommended “quarantine area” within the house if one of us were to fall prey to the virus; we just have not got the spare space. I dread the thought of bringing it into the house and infecting my Mum. The number of cases and the death toll rise daily. I start noting in my appointment diary where I have been, in case contact tracing is necessary. I think it unlikely that any of them will count, as my contacts are all fleeting and conducted at a distance.

**“I realise there is little chance of setting up the recommended “quarantine area” within the house if one of us were to fall prey to the virus; we just have not got the spare space”**

My sleep suffers – I either cannot get to sleep or wake early, my mind whirling with the fear that today will be the day I develop COVID-19. Worry piles on worry and there seems to be no comfort.

Not being able to go out means that my Mum and I now have no personal space between us. We do our best to be mindful of each other, to not indulge in those small irritating habits that could explode into a major disagreement. I watch every word I say, and everything I do, as there will be no escape if we argue. Each additional ask is like the drip of water on stone, wearing me down atom by atom.

Continuing to work means that I have some routine to my day, and it forces me to get up in the morning at my usual time. The first few weeks prove challenging as I am a technological dinosaur. My employer has provided everyone with standard IT kit to use at home, but as I do not have Wi-

Fi it is useless. I have a personal laptop, but I am on pay-as-you-go internet access. I apply to change to contract, but there is a delay in starting it, so my bills suddenly soar; whatever I saved on commuting costs goes on internet charges. I struggle with trying to configure my laptop to access my employer’s systems (multiple new software downloads, trying to work out how to get my video camera to work) and because it is a personal laptop, our IT department will not help me. The new way of working via Teams and Zoom meetings sets my heart racing and my palms sweating. I tussle with the etiquette of camera and microphone settings, worry whether the background view is inappropriate, and wince at the amount of data these meetings consume to what seems to be no great purpose. When one of these virtual gatherings has ended, I feel overwhelmed and psychologically drained.

A month passes. I lose more weight.

For the sake of my mental health, I have stopped watching the news quite so often. I try to distract myself, to crowd out the negative thinking: re-read familiar books; watch old films; indulge in creative writing; sign up for short online courses that sound interesting, such as How to Create a Poem and Psychological First Aid in Pandemics. All of us at work are struggling to adjust to the new remote working, but there is a sense that we are facing the challenge together. The way we work is having to change, and we have to try alternative ways of communicating every day. I do not adjust to change well; I take longer these days to do things differently. It seems I just get used to one thing when someone suggests that it is not working, and something else takes its place. My fear of failing starts to kick in.

Friendships outside of work have altered too. I know that circles of friends have had to shrink as priorities shift, but I am shocked at how many of the people I considered friends now ignore my emails and texts. It is sobering to realise that I do not make the cut. My self-esteem was never very high to start with, and this makes it plummet further. There is a sense of being completely on my own and that community spirit has disappeared. I wonder if everyone feels like this, or whether it is a reflection on my worth to the wider community. The thought crosses my mind that few people would notice or care if I became one of the COVID-19 death statistics.

Two months in. Lockdown is easing. Cases are falling. My weight loss has stopped. The Government publishes a roadmap for our way out of the pandemic, but I look at it with deep suspicion and a sinking feeling. It seems far too simplistic to suggest that we will be able to go back to normal life within the next few months. The virus is only lurking, and will mercilessly take advantage of any carelessness. “Over by Christmas” – where have I heard that before?

Three months on. My constant worry now at work is that I am falling further behind my colleagues in adjusting to home working, and I am letting the team down. I realise that a lot of the interactions I used to get my information from – overhearing other people, water cooler conversations – have disappeared, and online meetings do not provide the same informal environment. I don’t feel that I get the information I need to have any hope of succeeding at the tasks I’m being given. Processes change and I am not kept informed, so I keep doing the wrong thing, and if I ask to be kept updated, I am told I am being troublesome. I feel marginalised, and I get angry. That breaks down further the fragile relationships that I have with my colleagues. I am told I have no empathy, but empathy is a two-way process, and my fears do not appear to be being heard.

Four months on. Because of a security update by my employer, my access to work files via my laptop stops working properly and I no longer have access to Teams. Eventually, they agree to provide me with a laptop which has built-in mobile internet access; but once delivered, there is another round of trying to get used to a new operating system and more new software to allow me to make telephone calls through my laptop. My colleagues have all been using this software since the start of working from home, but I am late adopting it. The stress piles on. I feel like a hamster on a treadmill, and long to be able to get off.

Six months on. Cases rise again, to a level seen in the first wave of the pandemic. I feel that I have gone back to the beginning and that the last six months have been wasted. The worries that eased with the easing of lockdown are returning with a vengeance.

When I look back, I am rather disappointed in myself. I have not discovered some inner fund of resilience that I did not know I had; I have not expanded or grown, learned how to play the violin or wrote a novel. I have been more fortunate than some, I know. The only thing I can claim is that I have muddled through and survived so far. And that is the best I can keep doing right now.

**“The Government publishes a roadmap for our way out of the pandemic, but I look at it with deep suspicion and a sinking feeling”**

**Anonymous**

## “Helping others will aid in the recovery of everyone impacted by the pandemic”

It is crazy how much can change in a year... Sorry, I meant in two weeks. I am at a loss of explaining how abrupt this change was but I'll give you an insight: It was the refreshing season of Spring where the flowers bloom, the coos of birds ring through the evergreen trees, the sun fights for dominance over the light spells of rain, the Earth grapples with an invisible, deadly outbreak of a new virus. Yes, you read that correctly, 2020 is the year of the virus - not the rat. From my understanding, the outbreak of COVID-19 violently stretched around the world, was condemned an epidemic, lockdown of countries, and for the first time in history, exams were cancelled. Did you catch all of that? No, I didn't either. The overwhelming situation demanded us to drop our everyday lives and quickly adapt to the new “normal” but how did this impact on me?

Before lockdown and the closure of schools were announced, I had just turned seventeen with a French speaking exam the next day. I was prepared, motivated and eager to get it done but little did I know my school life would be pulled to a sharp halt. When the closure of schools and cancellation of exams were announced, I was devastated. I am aware of how odd that sounds, but I felt like my hard-work, devotion and time had been wasted. Furthermore, the routine of school gave me structure to my day so for that to be snatched away was a massive shock. Everything was so sudden, chaotic and surreal. For all I knew, the best was over and the worst was yet to come, and I was terrified. I must admit the first

week of lockdown was the toughest, I had zero motivation and found it impossible to adapt to the new normal. After one long week of sulking in my own self-pity, I decided to get a grip and focus on the important things.

**“With the shielding guidelines in place, I had to ensure my grandpa had his food shop and prescriptions”**

One of these important things was my grandpa. With the shielding guidelines in place, I had to ensure my grandpa had his food shop and prescriptions. Fortunately, I have always been close to my grandpa so helping him out has never been a problem (although I was upset that I could not have tea and cake with him). I knew from the beginning of lockdown that he would struggle so I ensured he had plenty of activities to keep him occupied. For example, I taught him how to use FaceTime, I baked cakes for him, I posted wordsearches through his door, phoned him every day, and ordered plants online delivered to his home. The only time I went inside his home (with

gloves and a mask) was to unpack his food shop, but I made clear he must stay in the living room with the door closed while I did this. I feared that my grandpa would not follow the rules because like many elderly people, he is stubborn and set in his ways. However, he did stick to these guidelines - until week nine. Like usual, I phoned him for his shopping list but he insisted he was doing his own shopping in Stirling! Explaining the risks and guidelines to him was like fighting a losing battle. Despite the obvious, I was disappointed and frustrated because I felt everything I had done for him was pointless.

As I said earlier, I was responsible for my grandpa's shopping. I was arrogant to think the shops would be no different and I did not know what to expect, but it certainly was not this... There were barriers separating people with workers in luminous, reflective jackets directing us. Before I was allowed inside, a worker squeezed a stingy amount of hand gel and wiped my trolley with disinfectant. I felt like an alien entering another universe as I stared at her blankly with worried eyes. The shop felt eerie, the bright lights gleamed over the quiet, ghost town aisles. The floors were coated with black and yellow tape, each strip carefully placed two metres apart. The atmosphere scared people out of the shop, no music, no noise, just the silent killer of COVID-19 lurking in the next aisle. This experience was an eye-opener to how much the world had changed, a change I feared.

Unfortunately, like many others, my mum is a keyworker (she is a nursery teacher). This worried me sick with fear because the children's parents worked in COVID-19 wards, and my mum was not recommended to wear PPE as it would scare the children! This impacted on us because after one week of work, we both had to isolate for two weeks, meaning we could not help my grandpa or meet my baby cousin Oscar. Even when the restrictions of lockdown eased my mum and I were still in isolation so we could not meet Oscar from a distance outside. I was heartbroken but I did not want to take the selfish risk. The one place my mum and I could go was our garden. If anything, lockdown has made me appreciate nature and birdwatching – I even think I have a pet pigeon (I decided to name him Pete). Maybe this pandemic could be the catalyst to a greener environment? With nature wrapping its arms around Earth, wildlife re-emerging and pollution levels dropping, nature is making its comeback and it is beautiful! I have also learnt a lot about my neighbours. For example, "Right Wendy I want a beef curry with chips", "Well I want a handsome, blue eyed Thor". Who knew the neighbours would be the new form of entertainment!

In conclusion, from the little information we know about COVID-19, the main solution is a vaccine. Despite the lockdown restrictions easing, I still believe that everyone must stick to the guidelines because it is selfish towards others and it forces lockdown to go backwards. During lockdown, I have observed many people blatantly break the rules which angered me, mostly because I see how difficult it is for my mum who would rather be furloughed than exposed to the virus at work. However, I do believe the government could have been better prepared as it hit other countries first – maybe we would not be at more than 40,000 deaths. Yes, I disagree with the government's contradicting advice and the "good progress" we are making but we all know the government do not care for the public's health, they only want the economy working for money. With all my disagreements, I still obey the guidelines. We are not being asked to fight in the war, we are being asked to sit on the couch at home. In the wise words of my neighbour "just because you're allowed to meet one other household, doesn't mean you need to." Furthermore, reflecting on this experience has been a learning opportunity for me and for all of us – a chance to focus on what matters and to think about living life differently going forward. For example, I am eternally grateful for my guinea pig Steve as I never realised how important the comfort of having a pet was.

Although, there has been a lot of stress during this pandemic like the risk of losing your job, becoming sick, or infecting a loved one, one silver lining of staying at home is that it has forced many of us to find new ways to manage stress. I found song-writing, playing guitar and P.E. with Joe to be the best outlets. Also, I have learnt that focusing your attention on others reduces stress, in my case helping my grandpa – helping others will aid in the recovery of everyone impacted by the pandemic. Another thing I am grateful for is the NHS and keyworkers, like my mum, who have taken on the risks for themselves for the benefit of everyone else. Before the pandemic, most of us probably did not think twice about the workers doing these jobs. Now that they are on everyone's radar, it has been heart-warming to see grateful people show their appreciation openly. Another positive outcome is living without modern conveniences; now that shopping, hairdressers, or going to the shop for one item has become impossible, I have realised I am surviving just fine. We do not need as much stuff or as many conveniences we have been accustomed to as the basics – food, water, and health – are much more important. Finally, the emotional high and sense of connection we get from the physical presence of others is sacred. Not only will I appreciate that presence after lockdown, doing so will deepen my sense of common humanity – something that when scaled up can build a kinder and connected society. Although COVID-19 is ongoing, I have adapted to change and accepted that life will be different. I hope we can hold onto these positive outcomes because our collective, compassionate action will be the key to a better future for us all.

**“With nature wrapping its arms around Earth, wildlife re-emerging and pollution levels dropping, nature is making its comeback and it is beautiful!”**

**Anonymous**

## “Positivity was by no means the norm throughout lockdown”

Returning to university at the start of the year came with a sigh of relief. I was framing it as a new start, an opportunity to re-build my confidence and return to my academic success. But the months to follow brought some unexpected circumstances.

During the term before Christmas, I had endured some of the lowest points in my life: I began excessively drinking, I took up smoking (despite not particularly enjoying it), and repeatedly self-harmed. It was only thanks to me meeting my current boyfriend (who I am so incredibly grateful for) that I didn't drop out of university completely – or do anything even worse.

The holidays over the festive period provided a well needed break, largely thanks to the days being organised around chocolate consumption, mostly following an excessive lie-in. But the return to university was a lot harder than expected. A week in and I was re-starting counselling having been diagnosed with anxiety and depression – and this time with a prescription for antidepressants. The following weeks continued to be tough. The drinking continued, the self-harm occasionally reared its head, and my mood failed to improve at the rate I was hoping it would. By the end of term, I was praying that a return to home and normality would finally, once and for all, sort everything out.

**“My coursework and dissertation became the main factors in my end-of-second-year grade. I was feeling pretty relieved at the removal of these stresses and at not having to return to an incredibly tense studying environment”**

So when reports of Coronavirus started to flag up on my phone – initially triggering genuine fear, later a kind of helplessness – I was unsure of what to expect for the rest of the year.

Lockdown was announced shortly after the end of term. In a car journey from Newcastle (a journey which would turn out to be our last for the next half a year or so) my boyfriend and I decided that I would live with him and his family for the foreseeable future. It was a big decision at the time – we had only been together for three months – but I knew the time apart would have left me vulnerable.

I have to admit I was in a privileged position location-wise for lockdown. My boyfriend lives in a lovely house out in the countryside. We were able to go on daily walks around the adjacent forest with his dog and relax in the evening in the fairy light-adorned garden. This is something I recognise many wouldn't have had, and something I know I am so lucky to have experienced. I know it did a lot for my mental wellbeing.

There were seven people in total living in the house. This made dinner times lively and the weekly shop a massive haul (it also happened to become the prime day of the week, two of us nominated to go into the outside world, the rest of the house treated to fine supply of biscuits). University was moved online. My exams were cancelled. My coursework and dissertation became the main factors in my end-of-second-year grade. I was feeling pretty relieved at the removal of these stresses and at not having to return to an incredibly tense studying environment. Achieving an overall first was a massive achievement for me after a difficult year, and encouraged me to persevere with my studies after contemplating having a break.

But this positivity was by no means the norm throughout lockdown. What I didn't anticipate were random outbreaks of crying I had on an almost daily basis. I would usually be studying, feeling neither good nor bad, only neutral, before getting the overwhelming need to cry. This was difficult to explain to those around me – I could identify no discernible reason for the way I was feeling. I think this must have been related to my anxiety becoming more intense. I hadn't had a full panic attack for two years until I suffered one about halfway through lockdown. Everyone was gathered in the kitchen and we were trying to work out what we didn't actually need off the excessively long shopping list. I was cleaning the coffee machine with a bombardment of questions – a situation that would usually only slightly bother me – before I started to feel nauseous, see yellow spots, and struggle to breathe. The feeling was familiar, and I took myself to a different room to regulate my breathing.

Luckily I only experienced something this intense once. But another way in which the lockdown affected me was my increased urge to drink alcohol. It initially began as the very normal glass of wine at dinner. But a few weeks in I found myself drinking at least one and a half bottles of wine a night, something I only realised was abnormal when my boyfriend's mother pulled him aside and asked him to see if I could try talking to me about how much I was having. I insisted it wasn't a problem – it was the taste I liked, not the effects – but I realised it was becoming a bit of a problem when I ran out one night. This got me agitated and I ended up putting in an online order of a large box. I know I have always had a few drinks, especially when feeling a little low, but this was the most extreme. I have luckily since managed to decrease this, having a few glasses a week, but the significant increase in consumption over lockdown was undoubtedly due to the worsening mood I was feeling in quarantine.

An over-the-phone medication review with my GP saw my antidepressant dose increase by 50mg. I have felt slightly better since, but I find it comes in waves. I often get my hopes up and think it has begun to settle, before I feel an intense, intense sadness and hopelessness for no apparent reason. This only produces further worry in the fear that I will always be like this. A more long-term and perhaps indirect effect of the COVID pandemic is the weight I've gained – you don't realise how much walking you do on an active day until you stay in the same place for six months. Setting up camp on the sofa to read, coupled with just a one metre walk to the fridge, produced inevitable weight gain. I have always had body image issues and was quite slim before the pandemic. An increase of two dress sizes might not seem dramatic, but it plagues my conscience and has caused my confidence to dwindle. As the world opens up again, I can only hope it begins to drop off – or that I learn to accept whatever size I am, as long as I am safe and as healthy as possible.

I write this with just a week until I return to university for my final year. I have mixed feelings about going back. A change of scenery really won't go amiss, and it will be a relief to finally be able to study without my dog barking relentlessly in the background or the family TV playing to itself in the lounge. But the overwhelming feeling is concern. I won't be living with my boyfriend any more – he will only be able to socialize with the members of his university household. I'm worried being alone will give a new life to those dark thoughts I had before I was with him. I'm worried my cramped room will prove difficult to live in in the case of a second lockdown. I'm worried the pressures of third year, all pushing ahead as a global pandemic continues to fester in the background, will chip away at any progress I have made. I can only try to let these worries pass and deal with whatever comes.

**“I would usually be studying, feeling neither good nor bad, only neutral, before getting the overwhelming need to cry. This was difficult to explain to those around me”**



28 September 2020

# “I’ve experienced a huge change in my personality”

I am a strong outgoing individual and have experienced a huge change in my personality and ability to cope through this drastic change in our lives.

Anonymous

## “If you have no mental health do you have any health?”

‘Thought I’d text, how do you manage not seeing people? We are here if you need anything, but if you can let us know how you manage isolated, we’d appreciate it’- the text from a ‘friend’. Not seen or heard from in months, a married mum of 2 teens, Physio by profession! Lock down then promoted texts and calls. Weekly contacts and chats from ‘friends’. Rarely heard from without my initial contact, because they are ‘sooo busy’. Now they were not working so they ‘had the time so thought I’d call’. When the return to work and seeing friends and relatives was allowed, the calls went back to normal. Nothing, unless I text to say ‘Hi, are you free for a coffee, chat or walk?’ Reply – ‘will let you know’. Three weeks later, still no reply. Or if it comes, ‘I’m sorry, my mum’s visiting’ or something that means they have no time for me. I’m used to being alone, isolated. I struggle with interactions following 2 years of a lack of compassion being shown in all aspects of my life; I am OK being ‘by myself’. What hurt the most. They realized and actually asked. How I coped. Because they, living with family, having a job they love, a partner or a pet. Saw lock down and no interactions, or allowed to do their job, took away their ‘normal’, their purpose, their identity, their friends and family. I lost all of these over a number of years, through redundancy, domestic abuse and unkind people. At the end of March, the one thing that really matters had to stop. Face to face sessions with a Mental Health Clinician, who told me one session. ‘I thought of you at the weekend’. Because they were worried. For the first time in 2 years, I actually mattered. She didn’t judge or tell me what to do. I had seen another who told me as she scribbled down some information - ‘You need to look at these web sites and do breathing techniques’. Not at all helpful.

Appointments moved to video calls. Exhausting as you have to talk. The visual clues and appearance less obvious. The courts and cafes have opened with screens. Those who need to see their clinicians’ face to face still delivered by video calls or wait. And you’ll have to wear PPE (Face covering) No searching for non NHS venues to install a screened facility, to aid the recovery of those who suffer with MH issues. It feels like CV 19 has returned Mental health treatments back to years ago, fixing it can wait. Can it wait for the person who feels alone, not of value and if they were ‘not here’ when would someone notice? If you have no mental health do you have any health? Do you have any life or just an existence when you disserve to be treated the same as the person with a broken leg! Not addressing MH face to face services which aids the clinicians well being at work too, is just letting the minor MH issues fester until it replaces CV-19 as a pandemic.

Lock down, not going out, not meeting or visiting friends and family, is how I live. It has not really changed for me. It has added some new issues that have set me back in my ability to go out. Spending all day convincing myself going for a walk will be fine, thrown by the risk and thoughtless individuals who failed to leave 6 feet gaps when passing, even told to ‘move up’ when queuing and leaving a 6 foot gap in a queue! It took me hours to feel up to going out. Never liked people in my space, when the 6 foot gap did register with people, limited numbers in shops actually helped me to do the shopping at times.

Covid -19 restrictions, in the main have not helped me. My commitment to the clinician who has gone above and beyond for me, to still be here. Has included making active efforts in regaining soliciting, making friends and finding pleasure in outdoor activities. I keep trying, I may get there. I am now redundant (Not CV-19 related) so I am again living on a limited budget and looking for work in a world where you still have to pretend you are ‘normal’. When you feel you are not and the world you are existing in is even further from what normal was when you broke down 2 years ago.

**“It took me hours to feel up to going out. Never liked people in my space, when the 6 foot gap did register with people, limited numbers in shops actually helped me to do the shopping at times”**

**Anonymous**

6 October 2020

## “Developed depression and anxiety and a whole lot of stress”

[My mental health has been affected] badly, developed depression and anxiety and a whole lot of stress. developed anorexia and it's ruining my life :)

**Anonymous**

It's been emotional for me and my family as I'm also a Carer.

**Delia Cazzato**

My mental health have taken a downward spiral.

**Wing See Li**

I have found myself getting to emotionally attached to other peoples problems.

**Clive Poulton**

As we face this 3rd lockdown I am running out of resilience.

**Lesley Preece**

# “I feel like I’m grieving for a life I’ve lost, never to be regained”

My emotional and mental health has deteriorated drastically as result of this pandemic. Before this occurred I was a happy person, often noted at work that I was always cheerful and never let anything get me down. I’ve coped with a lot of death over the course of my life (now 61) - nephew, brother, parents, friends, friends children but always picked myself back up and knew things would get better and my grief would subside with time. With this pandemic however, I see no end to this situation and feel like I’m actually grieving for a life I’ve lost, never to be regained. During the lockdown when I couldn’t see my children or grandchildren, that was terrible. I had a physical ache in my stomach. I see all of them frequently and not being able to see them, or my friends, made me feel sad, angry, fearful. As lockdown lifted my spirits lifted somewhat as I thought we were seeing a return to normality only to be dashed by further restrictions on our freedoms. The virus doesn’t bother me one bit. We all die of something at some point and this virus is no worse (in fact it’s infinitely better) than dying from other causes. What does bother me is how compliant people are and how willing they are to accept what’s told to them by politicians and the media. I often feel that if I can’t live a free life then I might as well be dead. The only thing that’s stopping me from killing myself is my kids and grandkids as I know too many people who’ve killed themselves and the devastation this causes but I’m worried that the bad days will get too much. I even wonder, if we ever do get back to normal, will I ever be the same again? Will I sit and worry that my freedom could all be taken away again. This is no way to live. It saddens and angers me. I drink too much now which I know doesn’t help but sometimes try to drink so much it will put me to sleep so I’m not thinking about things. I’ve been working from home now for six months which is a very lonely experience and no amount of phone calls, zoom meetings or any distanced connections will make up for being near people. The one good thing that this has taught me is how terrible it is for people who live this way constantly due to frailty, disability etc. What sad lives they must live. I must try and help them if this nightmare ever ends.

**“I even wonder, if we ever do get back to normal, will I ever be the same again?”**

## “Not seeing my loved ones for so many months has been difficult to cope with”

I am a 79 year- old male married to a Tanzanian lady and we have a 3 year -old son, they live in Arusha. I have not seen them since the end of June 2019. Our joint plan is to get them to England on a Spouse Visa. Furthermore, I am employed as a Drop in Coordinator for 15 hours a week by a local Charity but instead of normally being at the Charity, one day a week, I have been on my own at home still employed but working differently in the main by doing some research for the Charity and providing a weekly bulletin to all our staff, volunteers and Trustees to keep everyone supported in the best way I can with various ways of doing so, such as reminders of what visitors think of our Project, appropriate African Proverbs etc.

In terms of mental and emotional impact, let me share my thoughts and feelings.

**“Throughout all this period of time my emotions have been really tested and my mental state”**

As regards my family in Africa this has been a difficult time for me. I was due to visit them in March this year, but I had to cancel my trip at the last minute due to the start of Lockdown. The experience of not seeing my loved ones for so many months has been difficult to cope with, but my friends and colleagues have been really supportive and helped me manage this situation. At times though I do have a little weep when I hear what I am missing especially as our little boy is doing things that 3 year- olds do get up to. As for my wife I miss her so much, “Watsap” helps but it is not the same. There is also a concern about how they are coping with Covid 19, which is a worry throughout this pandemic.

As regards my employment, it has been quite an adjustment working alone from home. I am very much a people person and miss being with my colleagues most of the time. It requires quite a discipline to be organised and concentrate on the set tasks. It was a bit of a novelty at the beginning but it has been quite stressful at times trying to finish tasks even though no specific time limits have been set. Personal pride comes into it, to complete a task which itself brings its own pressure, albeit self- imposed.

Throughout all this period of time my emotions have been really tested and my mental state but whilst it has not been like normal times or as I would have wished it, I do have a strong Christian Faith which has helped me a lot plus the support of my colleagues and friends. I hope my thoughts of my experience are what you are looking for and may be of some help to other people.

At the start of Lockdown, I wrote a poem on 5th April 2020.

## **IN ISOLATION**

Here I am in my hold, in isolation as we are told  
Following the Guidelines to the letter, hope the sick will soon get better.  
Days go by, it makes me cry.  
Thinking of those in pain, hope my prayers are not in vain.

Maybe we could meet one day but keep our distance come what may.  
The day will come when Corona is done  
Then we can all celebrate, each with our own best mate.  
The experience will have taught, we were lucky not to be caught.

So, let us pray for those who are caring, on the front line with no sparing;  
Doctors, nurses. Police and medics, working constantly within their ethics.  
Putting their lives on the line, every day and every time.  
Where would we be without those who care? At times life can be so unfair.

Let us finish on a positive note, "let's meet again, don't know where don't know when" that gets my vote

**Anonymous**

9 October 2020

## “Suddenly I was stuck with my thoughts and I would get panic attacks”

I was diagnosed with anxiety at 10 years old and I had finally reached a point of calming it down. I had school and clubs as a distraction and it was all fine. Then when the pandemic happened suddenly I was stuck with my thoughts and I would get panic attacks about the smallest things like not submitting homework on time or the WiFi being slow. I hated myself for going back but I didn't stop it and let it take over again.

Anonymous

# “The lack of human interaction is somewhat soul destroying”

Last year I was an activities coordinator in a care home. Bustling with life and laughter and joy. I had always had my eye on moving into marketing to share this joy with others, showing the world that care homes are not what they are often perceived as in negative press and in January of 2020 I landed my dream job of Marketing Exec of the Care company which owned my care home. A whirlwind of learning and planning ensued.

When January became February and COVID began to rear it's ugly head I entered the care homes less to avoid putting our wonderful residents at more risk that they needed to be (non essential was what I was classed as within the care homes) and began working at home more and more.

Now 7 months after the care homes were forced to close their doors my world looks very different. No longer surrounded by laughter and hugs and fun I sit alone at home in quietness and solitude trying to continue to shine a light on the amazing work our care homes do. Remaining positive and joyful on the outside even though on a personal level I am anything but.

Groundhog day becoming a well known concept for me, like many others who now have a new normal of working from home.

The lack of human interaction is somewhat soul destroying and to someone like me who thrives on connection the world feels cold, disconnected and quiet.

While people have stood on their doorsteps and clapped for carers, sent gifts and cards into our homes and set up online ways of connecting it makes you look at the simple act of a hug in such a different light than last year. Without that connection physically. while people feel fed up, restricted and confused by the ongoing restrictions and lockdowns, no longer able to smile at strangers or have friends over we seem to have all been tucked away into our own little worlds within our homes only stepping out for essentials then rushing home again to hide away. It is human nature to look to others for help and support but now it seems that solitude and encasing ourselves in that is the only way to say safe.

Mental Health has always been an issue for so many but now it seems a pandemic within a pandemic is occurring and I just hope that once we find a cure for covid19 we can start to heal from it mentally as well as physically. Death, loneliness and solitude all around us, the end of the rainbow seems so far away and everytime we hope we are nearly there it seems there is yet another hill it's hidden behind. We just need to keep on seeking that pot of gold and we will get there in the end. Together. <3

**“Mental Health has always been an issue for so many but now it seems a pandemic within a pandemic is occurring”**



23 October 2020

## “The Sigh”

She sighed so heavily as she began  
clearing the tables, she seemed to sigh  
for all of us, like some sort of ending.  
That young couple had left such a mess:

Empty little packets of Fruit n’Fibre  
crumpled red serviettes, soggy tea bags  
smearing the table cloth and seeping through  
to the grain.

It was more than that though:  
Only Wednesday morning.  
Rain bucketing down.

The sigh seemed to spread  
and take up a position in the clouds  
and all afternoon blew itself across town.

Men in pink shirts in estate agents.  
Women in leotards practising The Lion’s Breath.  
The grubby windows of an abandoned hardware store.  
A couple stretching their necks out  
from the door of a Marie Curie Charity Shop  
like bemused ostriches. They all sighed.

Sighing as trouble, sigh as contagion:  
billowing the pink kagool of a woman  
walking her soaked-to-the-bone poodle

then out to the cliffs, where the sea  
takes it all in – the wind’s exasperation –  
bringing back its aired waters and breath  
as a beginning.

**“The sigh seemed to spread  
and take up a position in the clouds  
and all afternoon blew itself across town”**

David Gilbert

# “Not everything has been a bed of roses during lockdown”

## Background

I have suffered from mental health issues for a long time, although due to what I perceived as the stigma associated with these issues I did not admit either to myself or others that I was really struggling to cope. Instead I thought I was able to go it alone, BOY WAS I WRONG! Not only have I attempted suicide on numerous occasions, I found I was also increasingly self-medicating with alcohol to alleviate my pain and depression.

Things finally became too much for me in the summer 2018, when I finally realised I could not cope with things by myself and sought help both from my GP and my family. I was put on a course of anti-depressants and went to live with my sister, during which time I was also signed off from work whilst I was able to “get better”. This was extremely difficult for me as I had just gone back to both a job and company where I loved working.

Although I had given up drinking alcohol, I was then left to address the issues surrounding my mental health and severe depression. Things were not easy for a long while and I often felt my anxiety and depression slipping back to those dark days. I started attending regular one to one counselling sessions and also went back to work, where I was having regular well-being meetings with my team leader. With time I found it increasingly easier to talk with others who were willing to listen and help me navigate through both the good and bad days. With time I was able to function normally and eventually even managed to move back into my own home.

## Covid-19

I was doing really well and had progressed into group therapy sessions just once a week and felt like I was finally me again.

Then came the virus and subsequently lockdown in March 2020. This was a bit of shock, as I'm sure it was for everyone else. I believe I have always been a solitary person by nature and am lucky enough to enjoy spending time on my own. However, what I am not able to cope with is being alone for too long with my thoughts, this can be a very dangerous place for me to be.

My first initial reaction to lockdown was to feel like I was going to have a total meltdown and end up back to where I was a couple of years earlier. In simple terms I panicked, big time.

What was I going to do? Firstly my counselling sessions were cancelled – I would be on my own 24/7 with no other human contact.

I needn't have worried, although my physically counselling had been cancelled a friend contacted me and gave me details of various zoom sessions that were being made available, albeit this took a few weeks to actually put together.

**“I was doing really well and had progressed into group therapy sessions just once a week and felt like I was finally me again. Then came the virus”**

In the meantime, I had to think of a way I could cope with living on my own but keeping in touch with the outside world. Of course I had the usual phone and video calls with family, but I wanted to ensure I kept in contact with close friends. I therefore made a conscious effort to either text or call a different friend every day during the first month of lockdown. It was so lovely hearing from some friends with whom I had not spoken with in a while. I hoped that not only would this be good for my mental wellbeing but that it may cheer them up too, a random message just to check in to see how they were keeping and coping with the situation with the lockdown.

**“if anything lockdown has given me a new sense of appreciation for those that you hold close and dear to you”**

Thankfully I was also very lucky enough to adopt the most adorable dog towards the end of 2019, a very lovable (but not lap friendly) Staffordshire bull terrier called Rocky. As true to his name, Rocky really has been my rock during lockdown. Without him I would have been alone 24/7, which for me I felt could have been disastrous. Having Rocky also ensures that I have a reason to get up each and every morning, it has also meant that due to having no garden I was one of the lucky few that were exempt and allowed to go out for longer than just one hour for exercising in the early days of lockdown.

Rocky has been with me every step of the way, from knowing when I'm starting to feel down, he will come and sit next to me and either given me his paw or nudging my arm to fuss him or give him a good belly rub. He has now even started to creep further and further onto my lap, which for a 24kg dog is not a mean feat.

Once restrictions were slightly lifted I was able to enjoy forming a “bubble” with my niece and her family. It was great, we met for walks once a week which I hope was as beneficial with my niece as it was for me. In time the restrictions of lockdown were gradually lifted, I believe the main turning point for me was when we were able to meet friends outside for the first time, albeit with social distancing still in mind. It meant I had yet another reason to get out in the fresh air, particularly given the beautiful weather we have enjoyed during the summer. I was arranging walks with various friends and families at least 3 times a week, which was in addition to the walks I was enjoying with Rocky. This has had the added bonus of improving not only my mental health but also physical health too.

Talking of using physical exercise to help with mental health, I also signed up to various challenges during lockdown. These have ranged from Facebook live exercise classes, which have lasted between 2 and 4 weeks and culminated in me signing up to run 100 miles in August for the Teenage Cancer Trust charity.

Not everything has been a bed of roses during lockdown, unfortunately we received news that my mum may have suspected ovarian cancer. This was a bit of a shock but we have all pulled together as a family and kept in regular contact with each other and of course be there as a support for not only mum, but dad as well. We are still awaiting for a new date for mum's operation, the first one unfortunately having been cancelled, but I'm currently staying with mum and dad by way of support. This does of course mean Rocky has moved in with my sister around the corner, so I am missing him terribly but visit at least twice a day so get in lots of cuddles and walks.

It has definitely been a very bizarre six months or so, and with things as they stand I think things will continue to be that way for a little while longer. But if anything lockdown has given me a new sense of appreciation for those that you hold close and dear to you. It has given the strength to get through the tough early days of Covid-19; and to realise what is most important in life and those that are most precious.

I had panicked at the start of lockdown but just writing this article it has made me realise just how lucky I am, for one to be alive and second for all those loved ones that are there to help me through the tough times, and for me to be there to return the favour.

# “For all the episodes of depression and anxiety, I’ve found a resilience I didn’t know I had”

It’s November 2020. Nearly the end of the weirdest year in my over-half-a-century of life.

Lockdown2 has been extended past the original four weeks in Northern Ireland. It’s not as strict as England but it’s bad enough. And I have no faith that it will end in the promised two more weeks.

I thought I’d really struggle with the second lockdown, and I have, but I’m resigned now. The biggest impact on me is gym classes being banned, although thank goodness gyms are still open. Exercise is my mental health lifeline, and going back to the gym after lockdown1 was the only thing that got me out of a pretty bad depression. It didn’t prevent further episodes, but I was able to stick to my routine, and seeing people at the smaller classes was good craic. With just 12 people there we talked more, and I got to know my instructors really well. One of them has kept up zoom classes a few times a week with a 15 minute chat time before hand, and that’s kept me going too. I get to the real gym a few times a week and try to work out hard to get the endorphins going. Some days are better than others, but I always leave feeling more positive than when I went in.

I’m not a huge fan of Christmas. I spend it with my husband’s family who I really love, but it always makes me miss my own family in Australia and England. And to me Christmas is sunshine, and after lunch settles jumping in the pool with the family. So I listen to Tim Minchin’s White Wine in the Sun and get maudlin, however good a time I’m having with my family here. So if Christmas is cancelled for me it’s not a big deal, but I know it will be hard on my husband and his family. We’d talked of going to Australia this Christmas to spend it with family and break up the winter, which I’m not a big fan of.

I’ve been wanting to go to Australia all year. But the chances of getting there in the next year don’t look good, especially with new cases in Adelaide (where my family are) emerging this week. Their first cases since April. It seems incomprehensible that they managed it so well. Being an island helped, but so did the travel ban between states. Ireland is an island, and I can’t help but think we could have contained the pandemic here. It makes me angry how badly it’s been managed, and it’s yet another trigger for my depression. I watch our politicians bicker while people die. I made the most of the Eat Out to Help Out scheme and wonder if that makes me a hypocrite now that I am so angry about it. I know my rage is futile. It doesn’t help me and it changes nothing. But god I’m angry at how this whole pandemic has been handled by Boris and his cronies, and by the Northern Ireland Executive. I watched Dominic Cummings stage his departure from Downing Street and wondered if he’d quit after his Barnard Castle eye test how different policy might have been.

But back to Australia. I can’t go. And while I’ve been isolated here, I’ve lost a much-loved uncle to cancer and watched his funeral online feeling a million miles from the few mourners. Watching a cousin break down and being unable to hug him was pure hell. The time difference meant the funeral was 1 am, and I sobbed alone on the sofa, facetimeing family when it was over and sobbing uncontrollably as they gathered together and held each other. My father was in hospital when

**“I can’t help but think we could have contained the pandemic here. It makes me angry how badly it’s been managed, and it’s yet another trigger for my depression.”**

I heard the news in the middle of his night. I texted my mum who called him, but I was loathe to call in case he was sleeping. But he was awake, trying to call me but fumbling the phone and unable to. My heart broke.

My dad has been in hospital a few times during lockdown, and normally I'd have gone back to Australia to support my mum and take some of the load off my siblings. If I'm honest I don't know if I'll see him again. I don't know if I will be able to be at his funeral, to say goodbye if he does go. I don't know if it will be another online goodbye, sobbing on the sofa.

**“I don't know if I will be able to be at his funeral, to say goodbye if he does go. I don't know if it will be another online goodbye, sobbing on the sofa”**

The day they announced lockdown I was told my job was at risk, and was being merged with a role in England. It took months to find out I could move into a different role. It's a great opportunity, but the uncertainty was awful. I'm passionate about the charity I work for, and being furloughed with the chance of redundancy left me feeling unwanted and frankly useless. I was being told I was great at my job, and at the same time feeling like I was on the scrap heap. As soon as the furlough scheme was announced, the chief exec put out a call for volunteers to help at other charities. I jumped at the chance and took over the social media of a London-based charity who had had to furlough most of their staff. A morning team Zoom call each day got me out of bed and gave me virtual company. The task gave me stimulation.

Then the same CEO put me in touch with Centre for Mental Health and I began work on A Year in Our Lives. It saved me. I worked in mental health for years and had freelanced with Centre for Mental Health previously. It felt like coming home.

Writing a leaflet on supporting others to look after their mental health made me think about what I could do. It lifted me out of the first wave of depression and made me feel useful. And it got me writing again, which I love. The other charity I was helping out offered me a part time job and I took it happily, the routine helping as much as the amazing team I was working with. Now I'm back in my usual job I miss them terribly.

A few weeks into lockdown I was diagnosed with 'probable covid' at the covid clinic. It was a bizarre and frightening experience. Walking between taped off lines while people in PPE made me wait and then waved me on, opening doors so I touched no surfaces. I felt vulnerable and alone and scared of the diagnosis. The doctor and nurse were kind, and I looked at their eyes which were all I could see of them. Tests weren't available then, but my husband is a key worker and eventually I was tested. It was negative, but still I struggled to breathe. I couldn't walk up the steps without pausing, lay in bed exhausted. Unable to read, I listened to Marian Keyes read her new audio book Grown Ups, feeling like she was reading just to me. It was a comfort.

At first I watched the news obsessively. From the 5pm Downing Street briefing to Newsnight, via the BBC national and local news, Channel 4, usually some covid special. I wanted to know everything, as if knowledge were power. But over time I realised the news was depressing me. I stopped watching the briefings before they stopped and I don't watch them now. There are only so many slides of illness and death you can watch. I still watch the BBC and Channel 4 because I always have (I used to be a journalist), but if I'm down I pause the covid reports and forward through them. Sometimes I watch Newsnight for analysis, but it's no longer compulsory viewing. I don't trawl the internet for news like I did, except if it's the US election.

For a while I felt the world was crashing to a halt. I almost wondered if my mother's apocalyptic beliefs were right. Was Trump the anti-Christ? 2020 had fire and famine and plague and I swear I'd heard about locusts decimating crops somewhere. My anxiety got out of hand and I stopped sleeping. I have bipolar disorder and a lack of sleep can trigger an episode, so that added to my anxiety. My GP prescribed diazepam because that works for me, and it took the edge off and helped me to calm down and sleep. But even then I felt guilty resorting to benzos, even though I know they work for me and I'm careful to take them sparingly. My key worker has been amazing at keeping up the calls throughout, but it's not the same as seeing her. My psychiatrist has been redeployed and I've had one phone call appointment with someone I don't know. She was lovely, but it was brief and there was nothing she could really do to help me.

This sounds like a tale of woe, but there have been upsides too. Bubbling with my sister in law and her kids who I am very close to has got me through some of the toughest times. My 9 year old nephew and I spend a lot of time together, and even through this second lockdown I've been able to take him swimming. Last Sunday he asked if we could have time together every week and it made me feel loved and wanted and needed. Cuddling him makes me feel so good.

And my husband and I have grown closer working at home together. It could have gone either way, but we are so lucky to have the space to work separately, making each other coffee throughout the day to say hello. I'll be working at home permanently, and I think he will be too (at least for the foreseeable future), so it's just as well we get on!

We're also lucky we have a garden, which is looking a lot better going into winter than it did last year. Our tree has gone almost full cycle, from the first green shoots appearing like hope at the start of lockdown to the last few golden leaves tenaciously hanging on. We've fed the birds throughout and from my desk I can watch them pecking at the seed and nuts. Tits, sparrows, starlings, blackbirds, doves, a pair of pigeons and the occasional magpie. I've planted for winter colour, and put in snowdrops and bluebells to signal spring.

My work colleagues formed a WhatsApp group and we set each other challenges – who was wearing the smartest shoes, the geekiest childhood photo, show us what you had for lunch. We are closer apart than in the office.

For a while I did the banana bread thing and even managed one loaf of rather solid sourdough, but I haven't learned a language, or cleaned the house from top to bottom or finished crocheting my lockdown blanket. I haven't read every book on my list, or started a blog, or learned to podcast. But I did get through Tiger King, and a lot of Scandi Noir and the (fantastic) Queen's Gambit.

I've joined a neighbourhood virtual book club with strangers who are becoming friends, I started calling a woman who was lonely at the start of lockdown after connecting on a neighbourhood app and found a fascinating person with many stories to tell me. I've done the family zoom quizzes. And my own family who have been separated so long by distance have started to come together via zoom, nieces and nephews wandering in and out or briefly connecting to say hello.

And for all the episodes of depression and anxiety, I've found a resilience I didn't know I had. Who knows what the rest of 2020 has in store for us. Or whether 2021 will be any better. But I guess I'll hang around to find out.

**Liz Main Morrison**

## “Dire Straights”

Poetry has become the most effective means by which I can communicate in 2020. Everything is seen in the context of the ephemera of this moment: face masks have become a potent metaphor. This is nowhere near my worst year, however: that would be 2009, when I came very close to ending my life. This year is understanding that other people will be experiencing mental health issues for the first time that I have lived with for my entire adult life, and they will need support that does not currently exist in effective enough amounts to cover them all.

I want my poetry to start conversations, and to make people think about how they feel, and how they can cope with these changing, uncertain times. So many people are grieving right now, without the vital support they require. 2020 needs to be when we all accept that the community has a vital part to play in educating each other on how to survive, but most importantly how to recover. I hope my work might help stimulate these discussions, and most importantly encourage people to identify that they need to talk.

### Dire Straights

our line of drying face masks, technicolour hues  
recommended seller, bloke online paying his dues  
reminder of how quickly change will pivot to the fore  
mother nature's untold wrath, dangerous to ignore

half a year ago, this spot, believing she was queen  
everything presented strong, confidence in-between  
yet here i sit, stare, broken; destroyed by past's refrain  
this will not be the last time, moment to start again

looking back at town rebuilt, i did not recognise,  
responding to the march of time, progression in disguise  
some understood significance of past within themselves  
majority had no idea, moved forward, need compelled

buildings standing empty, but yet they still build more  
leave past behind, true legacy, economy ignored  
acceptance their ideas never worked out nearly as well  
let future sits in optimism's lap, quicker to sell

driving home that day at dusk, sub-station came alight  
st elmo's fire reminder, random circumstance; that's right  
node's haphazard union, chaos within life's plan  
it doesn't matter where you end, only that it began

recycling to present, believing perfect tense  
everything will be replaced, history's recompense  
presents our greater eminence: be ready, not afraid  
nobody stays the same here, not everyone is saved.

**“This year is understanding that other people will be experiencing mental health issues for the first time that I have lived with for my entire adult life”**

**Sarah Reeson**

# “You are never alone because we’re all in this together”

Hey Everyone,

My name is Suhaana. 2020 for me has been a huge challenge, this includes many major changes to my college and social life routine. When I first heard about coronavirus, I’ll be honest, I didn’t exactly know what it was or how serious it was, until I heard a lockdown was taking place.

When the lockdown was officially announced my mental health took over me immediately, I started to panic and ask myself questions such: Oh no what’s going to happen about my final drama performance? How am I going to rehearse with my class? How am I going to get my coursework done? What will I do whilst being stuck at home? All these thoughts made me so panicked and anxious at first, but when I eventually calmed myself down by listening to music and talking to people that I’m close to, I took a deep breath and said to myself, “Right, what am I going to do to stay occupied during quarantine and how am I going to adjust to my new life style?” And there was an obvious answer to both my questions and this answer, is a piece of advice I would like to share with you all, the answer to both my questions was “ I’m going to pursue all my hobbies, all the things that I love to do, the things keep me happy and positive.”

Doing the things that you love to do, will not just keep you occupied, but they will also make you feel positive at the same time, and I believe keeping positive is the most important thing right now and it’s something we should all be doing during this time. For me, writing, reading, baking, watching movies, playing piano, spending time with my family and watching YouTube videos, keeps me really happy and positive, and I love doing all these things.

In terms of the adjustments I made whilst we were all in quarantine, as I was not allowed to do all the things I would normally do such as go to college, hangout with my friends, go Waterstones to buy books ( a very important part of my life), I started thinking of ways that I could keep active and the ideas I came up with were, I could take short walks with my family whilst keeping safe at the same time, and I could do my daily 10,000 steps just by walking up and down my house. These ideas definitely worked for me as I got to stay healthy whilst being in quarantine. During quarantine I also started writing a book, and I have continued to write this book up till this day, I began writing in May.

Mental health is something we all experience in different ways. In my experience, I get overwhelmed easily and emotions such as: anxiety, anxiousness, anger, panic, and fear take over me. I also intend to worry about the smallest of things as well, whether that would be, not getting work done on time or if something isn’t being done right, it worries me easily and I get overwhelmed.

The way I coped with my mental health during quarantine is I used techniques such as: Talking to loved ones, listening to music, reading books, writing stories/scripts, playing piano, watching fun thing on YouTube, taking a hot shower, and drinking tea. Reading, writing, and playing piano are more hobbies than techniques to me because I love doing them, that’s my second piece of advice to you, do what you love during quarantine because those things you love doing won’t just keep you occupied, they will also keep you positive with a smile on your face. Talking to loved ones, listening

**“I get overwhelmed easily and emotions such as: anxiety, anxiousness, anger, panic, and fear take over me”**



to music, and watching YouTube are more of the healing techniques that I use to calm myself down if I'm feeling overwhelmed, so I would encourage you to try out these techniques!

Talking to your loved ones and friends, I find is extremely helpful. Because whenever you need someone to talk to or to make you smile and laugh, your loved ones and friends are always there! I know with all the social distancing, it can be hard to meet up with them in person, but there are always ways you can communicate with your loved ones and friends, whether that would be face timing them, talking on the phone and even texting them! I also find that your loved ones and friends keep you very positive and it's important to always be positive especially during this time, never forget that!

**“I was always afraid that I will never find ways to cope with my mental health. But eventually, I found all these great techniques and now I use them anytime I'm feeling overwhelmed!”**

Taking a hot shower and drinking tea are new techniques that I started using a year ago and they have honestly helped me out so much. How? When taking a hot shower, it relaxes your mind and calms it down, so that you can reflect back on and think about whatever it is that is making you feel overwhelmed and find a way to solve the situation. Drinking hot tea, numbs your headaches and makes the pain your head is in from being overwhelmed go away, when the pain goes, it also takes your overwhelmed worries and stresses along with it. So I would definitely encourage you to try out these techniques!

Before I found all of these techniques, I let my mental health get the better of me and as a result, I ended up in tears. I was always afraid that I will never find ways to cope with my mental health. But eventually, I found all these great techniques and now I use them anytime I'm feeling overwhelmed!

Remember everyone, it may not be so easy to cope with your mental health at first, but trust me, when you find the right healing techniques to help you cope with your mental health you will be just fine. I will also say, never be afraid to try out new techniques because then you will never know if they work or not, so never be afraid to try. Also remember that you are never alone when dealing with your mental health especially during this tough time, we're all in this together and we will get through it together!

In terms of my college life now, my college have made adjustments to make sure myself and all the other students are being taught in a safe and secure environment. One of these adjustments include remote learning one week at home and learning one week in college. This adjustment has made me feel a lot more safer whilst studying and I have no more worries about not being safe whilst learning.

As a reflection, I want you to remember to never be afraid of trying out new techniques to help you cope with your mental health and also never be afraid to try anything new! And remember that, during this time or any time, you are never alone because we're all in this together and we will get through it together!

Thank you.

## “The feeling of a frustrating lack of closure on that part of my life consumed me”

As the death toll went up, stories of patients dying alone were spread across all news outlets and months were passing by, i felt myself change inside. I was more reserved. Less interested. Less motivated despite being desperate to be so. I was like a car that just wouldn't get going no matter how hard you turn the key.

I spent the majority of Lockdown with my mum as my dad is an NHS ambulance driver, working 12 hour shifts. I remember her getting a call from her boss, around late May perhaps, telling her that she should prepare herself to come back to work within the coming weeks. She was so excited to gain some of her normality back after so long and while I was so pleased for her, I also felt an unexpected pang of jealousy. I'll never get the opportunity to say goodbye to a lot of my good friends who were heading to uni in the summer, i'll never get a chance to say thank you to my teachers for all they did to prepare me for my a levels. I will never get my normal back. My pre lockdown life.

I knew that in the grand scheme of things this was miniscule but in my little bubble, the feeling of a frustrating lack of closure on that part of my life consumed me. I never enjoyed secondary school but college was somewhere i thrived and so to never be able to properly return there makes me sad.

Sad seems like such a bland word for it but the emotion of sadness is far from bland, it's an ache. A genuine ache in my heart at what has been taken from me. It was my purpose. Our life was always mum and dad work, I go and be a student, we all come home and share stories of our days. As my parents return to work as normal all this is slowly returning, except now the only interesting part of my days is filling out job applications and teaching myself to cook.

Amongst it all I was, and still am, surprisingly hugely grateful for fresh air and nature. I have always loved being outside but i definitely found a new appreciation for it during quarantine. Mother nature seemed to really come alive at the absence of human interference. When the fresh weather came along I did everything possible to just sit and take a long deep breath in it. To sit and listen to the bird song, to feel the warm sun drape across my back and the gentle breeze in my hair. There was something incredibly grounding about it. It was a pleasant reminder that there was a wider world outside of the walls of my house. A reminder that when all this chaos, pain and uncertainty is (eventually) calm, life is out there waiting to be lived.

Another daily escape for me is music. Unfortunately for the creator in me, i am in no way musical but I am grateful for the solace I found in other artists music. Again, since i was a baby I have relaxed to music but this year I found myself exploring new genres, new artists, a new narrative type of music. Almost like a book being read to you with a melody behind it. (Very hippie I know.)

**“Sad seems like such a bland word for it but the emotion of sadness is far from bland, it's an ache”**

I appreciate the escapism it gives me, how I can create 'characters' from the lyrics being sung. It keeps the brain ticking.

Now, in gloomy late October, on occasions I feel a sense of isolation, at times loneliness while others go about their new normal and I find myself retreating back to these comforts while trying to carve my own new normal. I find it all about distraction. A shift in focus in order to maintain an essence of sanity.

Looking towards Christmas and I must admit and that all material items seem insignificant. If nothing else all my heart is genuinely craving right now is a hug from my grandparents. I want to hear my nans voice in person again. I want to sit on her sofa in front of the fire as the budgie chirps along in the background. I want to stand in the kitchen with her and mum as we chat away, my father and granddad browsing my nans buffet table in the living-room. Until then i've made a promise to myself to never take these moments for granted in the future, when all this is hopefully a distant memory. To hug a little tighter, to not rush in person conversations and to be present in those small moments that ultimately will mean the most looking back.

**Emma Smith**

29 October 2020

## “The pandemic has forced me to re-evaluate all aspects of my life”

There is nothing quite like a pandemic to change the shape of not only the outside world but the one that exists inside of us to.

For me, since March, the pandemic has forced me to re evaluate all aspects of my life, from work, to family to my physical and mental health.

The world outside is flailing about, trying to find a stability along with a flexibility, this is very hard to so. The world inside myself, my thoughts, my feelings have been trying to do the same and it has been one hell of an uphill struggle.

Then I realised that I was only thinking in terms of what other people wanted or needed from me and not what I needed or wanted from myself (and from others).

So I took a long hard look at myself and forced myself to confront how I had been feeling - worn out physically and emotionally, constantly stressed and in a state of high alert along with may other things. Once I had acknowledged them all, I asked myself “How important are the things that cause some of these feeling?” The answer for all but two of them was “not important in the slightest because the gain is far less that the loss of my physical and metal well-being.”

So, after discussing things with the two remaining important things, I gave the others up and I am now focussing on my needs and those of my loved ones. There is still stress and uncertainly but it is far more manageable now.

We all have to find our equilibrium again but I think we have to ensure it is ours that we find and not the one that only serves others and still damages us.

**“I took a long hard look at myself and forced myself to confront how I had been feeling - worn out physically and emotionally”**

**Anonymous**

# “The new normal life that we have adapted to has changed us for both good and bad”

How do you achieve mental peace has always been that billion-dollar question. There's no definite answer for this ever going dilemma.

My story starts a little earlier than 2020. When I was trying so hard to get into a postgraduation course abroad, but couldn't afford one without a scholarship. So, I started applying to Universities and scholarships overseas. In October 2019, to my utter surprise, before getting any university offers, I got interviewed for the Commonwealth scholarship, that too making it to the top 3 of the lists. Unfortunately, no candidates were awarded that year from my sector. Right after that, I started getting unconditional offers from Top 100 universities of the UK, USA, Sweden, Germany, and Australia. I kept on applying for scholarships in order to fulfill my dream of studying in one of those universities. But the rejections also kept on coming. Amidst all these, Coronavirus started to invade our lives.

Every time I tried a little harder to keep myself on track rather than breaking down, other bad news would arrive. I was living far from my family and whenever a new symptom, a new vulnerable group, an increase in COVID-19 cases, a closed one's loss came into my knowledge I would immediately start to worry about them. I would constantly feel this emptiness inside thinking about a life without them. My worst fear slowly started to become my biggest fear and that was losing my family and not being able to look after them. I would also feel really unproductive and unworthy at times. I have gone through a lot worse before 2020 but this year hit different because I felt sad as well as anxious, depressed as well as lonely, frightened as well as weak. I endured an unknowing pain that kept me from enjoying even the biggest accomplishments.

**“Every time I tried a little harder to keep myself on track rather than breaking down, other bad news would arrive”**

Whenever I looked up on social media, I would stumble upon my friend's post about being successful, about passing an exam, about starting a family, and importantly about being happy. But little did I know that what you see on screen may not be the real story. Everyone has their own struggles, their own battles. But all that happy news actually made me think what is happiness actually and how are they able to grasp it so easily? I deactivated my social media to

keep my mind in peace. I felt like I was cursed and had an evil eye on me. I stopped letting people know about my accomplishments, about my plans, about my happy days. Maybe the time was really hard for everyone but I took it to myself for being a failure. I was deeply in search of mental peace. I lost interest in doing things I liked to do. But I never lost hope, because I had faith in God and that everything happens for a reason. My beliefs were so strong that it kept me sane in the middle of all insanity. I completed reciting the whole Holy Quran during the month of Ramadan. That was my biggest achievement this year. In the past, I always tried to do it but never had the time to do so.

And yet, when all the doors started to close, I decided to take a risk of asking my parents to sponsor my studies abroad. They agreed without any hesitation because that's how parents are! Without knowing any outcome, future-prospects, or career plans I took the decision against my usual introverted, shy self. I found myself busy again preparing for my new start. Offer acceptance, Visa, Course Registration, Orientation and finally arriving in the UK and starting my classes felt

like a dream. I started hiking in this beautiful place which I can call my home for the next 1 year. I found my therapist, my mood maker, the mother-nature herself. I vowed to be hard-working and focused than ever. I wish to enjoy life to the fullest alongside my studies. I prayed to be successful to make my family proud.

The coronavirus has kept us in the palm of its hand for a long time but the new normal life that we have adapted to has changed us for both good and bad. But everyone must keep on trying to achieve mental health satisfaction through whatever makes them happy and sane. Be it buying things online, working out, binge-watching Netflix all day, posting on Instagram, going crazy for favorite K-pop idol, gossiping, or making lame jokes- everyone deserves to have mental peace in their own way without being judged or feeling insecure.

**Syeda Fairooz Fariha**

## “I had almost ‘prepared’ myself for these unprecedented times”

Despite carrying a serious and diagnosed mental health condition I can truthfully declare I am coping with the ramifications of this present pandemic rather well, thank you.

It is not because I am ‘mad’ and hence oblivious! It is because I can grasp the pandemic (and particularly ‘lockdown’) It has been an opportunity for personal pause, growth, reflection and healing.

From out of years of once deep pessimism I had almost ‘prepared’ myself for these unprecedented times: ‘Nothing’, almost to that, which a person I have previously endured. And to have already reached a point where I could re-assess my existence in better mental health (during the lockdown). Once this would have caused me great anguish – everything closed in the High Street, some psychiatric facilities worryingly curtailed by Covid.

Yes, I was now in a more positive frame of mind. ‘Lockdown’ could not break me however grave it might be for the nation. Through my circumstances I had no employment to be furloughed away from and state benefits were still received. Personal finances were not an issue.

So little of my life altered..... well, there was those closed public libraries and the coffee shops in which I once spent many a creative hour engrossed by what I do best – writing! But then this can be done anywhere, even in the great pause, there is the familiarity of home.

I am realistic too. I detest cooking for myself (cafes shut). I am no chef. And often I stayed in bed just too long for my liking or comfort. As a single man there was nobody in the flat to perhaps motivate me. I was, however, aptly and most gratefully supported by the caring lady from my local voluntary services organisation. A welcome voice twice each week to make me feel still involved, connected and wanted. The representatives of the charity which houses me also telephones, and not least I would call my Mother. I was not alone, never being in a crisis mentally or emotionally. Sadly, I hear that some were.

But I am learning to be content in any situation. And as I informed younger people from the start – This is not as bad a threat as a Nuclear war! And privately, as ones’ inner past.

I was relatively free to walk outdoors, shop, exercise, and observe the phenomenon. My creative writing has seen improvement during this time. I composed poetry; I could really think!

When Coronavirus departs as history, gone from the air and all surfaces of the world (perhaps this will be in the Spring of 2021), I can understand from it not only others tragedy but dare I say ‘hope’. I want to be a published author in that Covid free new world. It can’t be just like the past, or my sad past.

I can come to value being alive having survived the pandemic and my own mental health needs. I can realize today the dreadful psychological toll that it has had upon so many human beings. It can humble me. Nobody I know has died of Covid – 19.

**“Once this would have caused me great anguish – everything closed in the High Street, some psychiatric facilities worryingly curtailed by Covid”**

Conversely, had the pandemic not brought out the best in other people too? Helping, caring and supporting in a love and concern for one's neighbour? I remembered that the NHS is so very, very essential – The clinic where I am medicated by injection fortnightly stayed open throughout the crisis and for those who may well have believed that lockdown was too much to cope with, then there were nurses there to listen and take appropriate action if need be.

Staff in an unselfish risk of exposure to a deadly virus. The many.

So there was the safety net of a whole array of careers. At least this was my experience. Other people, ordinary members of the community as well as those whom I don't yet know, who went through 'A year in our lives'. A time to pause, and a time to be thankful to all; in remembrance yes – but hoping for yet better days.

**Warren Farley**



2 December 2020

## “Scared to go out, panicking indoors”

Coronavirus kills. It killed my mother. Guilt, terrible guilt at not being able to visit. Guilt heaped on top of guilt. Guilt caused by lifelong depression. Always there, made worse by lockdown. No social network to keep me afloat. Unreality. My mother died without me. Scared, scared to go out, panicking indoors. Mental health Skype groups a lifeline. Hang on for a vaccine. My mental health is always a step away from crisis. Bipolar plus coronavirus, a lethal combination. Follow advice. Take medication, walk daily, vitamin D supplements, invest in a light therapy lamp. Sunshine in the living room. Helpful. Missing my grown up kids, grandchildren. Missing my latte with friends. Friends who share mental illness. We used to laugh, support one another. Going shopping, mask on, don't look at anyone, don't touch anything you don't want to buy. Mental health damaged for ever by Coronavirus.

Patricia Killeen

## “I just feel that the bottom’s fallen out of my world”

I feel that the measures introduced to combat the Covid-19 outbreak have had a terrible impact on my mental health.

I wasn't in a particularly good place before all of this, in my mid fifties, living alone, family 200 miles away, with a demanding job (local authority, key worker) however I had a number of coping strategies. These included treating myself to a meal out occasionally, or going out just for a few drinks twice a week, or meeting friends, or having a day out on my own at the seaside. I also loved my annual holiday – a week in Cornwall in early autumn – which was so important to me.

Due to the pandemic I haven't been able (& when the restrictions were relaxed in the summer, I no longer felt confident) to do any of these things. I haven't had a meal out, or been for a drink, or seen friends, or family, or had a day out, since early March. I cancelled my holiday too.

I'm very fortunate in that the restrictions haven't meant that my job's been threatened, however I've been incredibly busy with work since the pandemic started & that's been very stressful & pressured. Working all hours, at home, working on days which I've booked as annual leave too. I feel as if I haven't had any sort of break at all since Christmas 2019.

I now feel awful – burnt out, very depressed, exhausted – but the work just keeps coming & all of my pleasures / coping strategies have been taken away. I have some very noisy & inconsiderate neighbours & can now only escape the stress they cause if I go to the shops or for a walk, there's just nowhere else to go. I feel like a prisoner in my own home.

Christmas can be a difficult time due to a family bereavement on Boxing Day a few years ago. It's already obvious to me that Christmas 2020 will be particularly hard because, due to the pandemic, I won't be going out anywhere, won't be seeing family & won't be seeing friends. Just stuck in the house, on my own.

It's been getting to the point during the last months where my life's no longer worth living. It's simply become nothing more than an “existence” – with all of my pleasures taken away, yet vastly increased stress due to all of the extra pressure which the pandemic has caused within my job & incarcerated at home with more stress caused by the neighbours from whom I can no longer escape for a while. It's horrible.

I really am trying so hard to carry on & keep going – but it's becoming increasingly difficult after nearly 9 months of restrictions, taking away all of the things which I used to enjoy with all the additional stress & pressure too. This is the worst time of my life & I'm so worried that, when we do come out of the restrictions, I won't be the same person that I was before because I feel that this has damaged my mental health so badly.

I'm also very fearful of the future, having suffered from mild anxiety for a number of years & now extremely worried about how we'll be expected to pay for the cost of the pandemic – & the impact of that on my financial position for the remainder of my life.

I just feel that the bottom's fallen out of my world & I'm increasingly concerned about my current mental state, plus the long term impact of all of this on my mental health.

**“I now feel awful – burnt out, very depressed, exhausted - but the work just keeps coming & all of my pleasures / coping strategies have been taken away”**

**Anonymous**

# “Thankfully we got through the first wave but then came the second”

I work for the PTS Ambulance Service and have been for the past few years. When this Covid virus first hit us I was worried about how it would affect us all but honestly did not think it would be as terrible as it was to be.

When the first national lockdown started I knew then it was a very serious problem and I am not ashamed to say I became scared more so because we were starting to move Covid positive Patients. I became worried that I could take this virus home to my Family, My Wife has an autoimmune condition and she was in the high risk category of People.

I did consider shielding myself with my Wife but we both agreed that as we are both frontline Staff we need to continue but obviously take the very necessary precautions.

Thankfully we got through the first wave but then came the second wave and to us that seemed more serious, We lost 2 close Friends to this horrible virus and now I personally know 17 People who are now tested positive 3 of which are very seriously ill and in ICU on Ventilators.

When I look around and see lots of People blatantly ignoring the wearing of masks, Social distancing, Congregating etc it really angers me to say the least, I actually had a neighbour say to me I am young fit and healthy so I know I will not get it!!!! I was so angered at his attitude and replied Well tell that to my friends family, Their Daughter was as you put it Young Fit and healthy but she got it and she died from it. God I was so infuriated at his attitude.

**“I am petrified every time I go on shift especially knowing that some of my Colleagues are actually off because they have Covid”**

People ask me am I scared doing my job?? Yes I am petrified every time I go on shift especially knowing that some of my Colleagues are actually off because they have Covid ?? I just hope and pray that this vaccine works but still a lot of ignorant people need to wake up and realise just how serious this virus is, Maybe we should have another full lockdown and come down hard on those who ignore it and break the rules. I honestly think our Government were too soft on us albeit I think the PM thought he could trust us to do the right thing but sadly he was wrong.

Wake up everyone please and let's stop this virus in its tracks Yes I know jobs are being lost but I would rather be alive and out off work than dead.

# “Nothing could have prepared me for this earthquake of fears”

A year in our life 2020

I'm not sure in all of my 60 odd years on this planet I could have understood or believed the feelings this pandemic has unraveled in me.

I may have been bored, unhappy, depressed even, always seeking I knew not what but nothing could have prepared me for this earthquake of fears, struggles, nightmares and anxieties of 2020.

It has made me see in full technicolour detail how fortunate I have been in my life. Enough money to pay the bills, getting to live a bit of the dream with world travel, regular gym goer, choir member, even appeared at a popular venue in Birmingham to sing my heart out.

Of course there have been bereavements in my family but I got over those.

When I first heard the initial news of Covid 19 I knew something world changing was about to occur. I've always been highly interested in medical matters and maintained an objectivity but this hit me hard.

I've never had anxiety to any noticeable degree pre virus and it hit me like the proverbial ..... bricks. I had no point of reference and neither did the news, any articles I read, anywhere at all, could I get a handle on this horror.

I compare it to the outbreaks of World Wars I and II. I wasn't in either but have read enough of both to be confounded as to how people survived the sheer awfulness of it.

I can only say I have always found difficulties keeping a rein on my weight. Though not greatly overweight I was no sylph like, supermodel. Fast forward to Covid and I lost a stone in two months which I have kept off as I seem to have lost the appetite for food nowadays. I now covet healthier foods which is both a blessing and a sadness.

I have developed a sheer paranoia about walking out not least because of people in blissful ignorance who insist on making you walk out of your way as in some weird competition designed in their heads they decided they are not going to step aside for anyone.

Supermarkets have become that greatest of memory tests. List includes face mask and not the ones that ping off my ears when I'm in the supermarket and cause me sheer terror. I've become vulnerable to any stray cough or sneeze that permeated the air.

Remembering to sanitize my hands, the credit card, leave it to dry then remember to put it back into my purse. Oy vey !!

I long to sit in a cafe, lingering over a latte and snack, not afraid to queue up and eat out at restaurants, go to my local

**“I've never had anxiety to any noticeable degree pre virus and it hit me like the proverbial bricks”**

gym, walk freely, see my family. So many lost things and I wonder if we will ever get them back, that innocence of hugging, chatting, sitting next to each other; dating even, for us singles.

I watch programmes on television which were made pre Covid. Tears well up in my eyes at those programmes where people hug, shake hands, chat, sit on trains, planes, coaches, buses.

Such poignancy.

Lost, innocent, happy days !!

I have however, discovered a world where everyone to a degree, is more equal.

Suffering can do that for us and knowing that people who hadn't known depression or anxiety previously have found how much it can change their world and challenge it in ways not to be believed.

I have also found myself avoiding television programmes where my emotions will be too raw or overwhelming. "Silent Night " is an all time favourite Christmas Carol for me and I've loved it always but there is a programme about to be on, which is about its origins and history and it will be too raw for me to watch now. I have a religious faith but can't seem to cry. I pray, sometimes fervently but I have had to switch off my feelings to save my sanity I guess.

I'm trying so hard now to remember how to laugh and how I used to have such a wicked sense of humour. I read that babies laugh hundreds of times a day and I want to recapture that innocence and joy.

I want so badly for this vaccine to work but am at the same time so scared of having it in my body. My 90 plus Mum refuses point blank and seems utterly unfazed by the rigours of "Happy Birthday " hand washes or sanitizers. Maybe because she doesn't do either of these things, maybe it's her generation, I'm not sure. But she baffles me and yet I admire her seemingly impenetrable indifference to it all.

This Christmas has both a strange sadness yet sanctity about it. We stand on the threshold of a fragile hope of redemption through inoculation, a baptism of fire through the flames of hope. Surely Christmas is a time of hope, a fresh try at life and " A Happy New Year to us all," as Tiny Tim would cry.

15 December 2020

**“I didn’t realise a broken heart actually hurts like real pain”**

Iv never felt so alone in my life. My partner and best friend and soulmate sadly passed away in November 2020 age 53 with covid. He went into hospital on 14th November with breathing difficulties within 6 days he was gone. I couldn't visit him or see him in hospital then got a call to say come in on the 20th they told me he was gonna die that day. After putting me in ppe I was with him when he passed. I just feel lost alone (even though I'm not) even scared of the future my life will never be same again. I'm still in shock I don't think I'll ever get over this. I honestly didn't realise a broken heart actually hurts like real pain. There just doesn't seem to be a light at end of my tunnel.

**Julie Sample**

# “Lockdowns have given me back some time”

It has been a bit of a mixed year for me as the first lockdown, my mental health was OK but I was not getting out to exercise as I was too tired after working from home but I did a lot of arts & crafts. The 2nd lockdown was harder on my mental health as I was having issues with work, my health, my husband had lost his job & we had issues with our neighbours. For the 1st lockdown, my mum had to isolate so I had to make sure that she had enough food. She was underlying health issues due to my mum being in remission from Breast Cancer from July 2019. Also she is over 65 years old.

The lockdowns have given me a chance to do some arts and crafts which I wouldn't usually be able to do. In normal times, I would be travelling to London for work & that would normally take 1 hour & a half each way. The lockdowns have given me back some time which I wouldn't have had. It has also meant that I have been able to spend more time with my husband as he lost his job twice within the lockdowns. He has been an amazing support & I don't know what I would have done without him. I am not the easiest person to live with especially in the 2nd lockdown.

**“I am petrified every time I go on shift especially knowing that some of my Colleagues are actually off because they have Covid”**

I tried to make sure that I didn't watch too much of the news as it wouldn't have been helpful to me. My mum messaged me to make sure I was OK everyday and I would check with her to see if she needed anything and was OK too. Cafes when open have been a bit of a lifeline as it gets me to talk to other people & it gives me an excuse to get out of the house. I am not one for going out for the sake of it. On the 1st lockdown, I ate more comfort food as I think I had a bit of boredom even though I was working from home. On the 2nd lockdown, I was able to eat healthier.

I have done a lot of crocheting of small blankets and I have been doing lots of colouring and scrapbooking which is really nice as I am able to look back at the art work I have been doing in 2020. I also try to do a meditation class for 25 mins a day if I have time.

I wrote two poems about the Pandemic called Masks and Tasks and Lockdown Poem:

## **Lockdown Poem (May 2020)**

Sitting on the sofa  
Silence on your mind  
Lockdown is in session

Clapping for the NHS  
The posties, the binman,  
The carers, the supermarket staff

Masks of PPE are the reminder of 2020  
2 metre distance between each human being  
Ghost towns in UK streets

## **Masks and Tasks (20th September 2020)**

The mask can be suffocating  
It can hide your identity  
The more you wear it, you become a hidden number  
You sanitise your hands, but your hands are sticky and worn  
The tasks we have to do for the awful pandemonium.

## “It has been a rollercoaster”

It has been a rollercoaster. I always had a keen interest in pandemics and infectious diseases in general. This leads me to closely follow developments in China at the start of the year. I have become increasingly anxious about the situation. Being ridiculed by those around me for catastrophising and exaggerating was difficult. The well meaning reassurance that only old people or those with pre-existing conditions need to worry was also hurtful as I happened to have a chronic respiratory condition. I have taken matters in my own hands and stocked up on masks, sanitisers etc early on.

Despite best efforts I have succumbed to the illness likely to be Covid in March. It was scary as there were no tests and 111 advised me to stay at home and call 999 if unable to breathe. I have followed my asthma plan and spend 2 miserable weeks suffering from very high fever, exhaustion and constant shortness of breath. The scariest part was my husband also being ill. I feared that we will both die and will remain undiscovered in the house for ages with no family near by.

We have recovered. No long Covid and no lasting effects as far as we can tell. The lockdown has been very much enjoyed. As introverts, we value having lots of time for ourselves and the fact that we no longer need to make polite excuses not to attend social functions as there aren't any. Working from home has been absolutely fantastic, long may this continue.

My mental health has been going from strength to strength with many stressors and triggers removed. The narrative focuses heavily on negatives and the extrovert deprived of their past times. Welcome to the world that favours introverts for ones.

**“Being ridiculed by those around me for catastrophising and exaggerating was difficult”**



## “We found consolation in the smallness of my physical world”

It arrived slowly. We saw it. But perhaps, we didn't want to see it. Mid-March we started making plans at work. Who would need to be prioritised. Where we would need to focus our concerns about co-morbid conditions. I remember a planning meeting just before Johnson's first statement, we had the ideas, the plans, the priorities set. I went home. Over the next week, it became real. We saw what Covid-19 looked like up close. More staff were sick, more shifted, if they were able, to homeworking. Although we'd seen it coming, it felt very fast when it arrived, just before the national lockdown.

Everything changed in some ways. It was fairly early, still in March, that the first people I knew, although not close to me, had experiences of this new illness, and then, I heard about people I knew, dying. I was scared. I knew I had to keep working. But I was frightened for myself and my family as I worked. It felt hard to concentrate on the tasks that needed to be completed. But I was aware I was one of the NHS workers constantly lauded in the press, on the doorsteps, on the news.

I was a part of this but I was removed. I was not on a ward, like the doctors or nurses, but had been deemed 'non-essential' and at risk of 'increasing foot fall' so was consigned to an office in the hospital, watching the nurses and doctors I worked alongside, struggling, battling with this virus and the increased restrictions and stress that came from it. I saw the very best. But I was not part of it. I was both supporting but also removed as I tried to work through it.

It was during one of our regular reflective practice sessions, that had moved online, that I felt worst. Listening to the ward staff talk about how they had felt abandoned by the rest of the multi-disciplinary team, of which I am a part, but how they could not but come on to the ward, face their fears, put their own health and the health of their families on the line, while I dialled in from home. That we were able to have this conversation in the open, despite its pain, was a testament to the strength of the team.

### “My neighbour, spotting me as I passed her house as she put out the bins, asked me why she hadn't seen me clapping on my doorstep”

My neighbour, spotting me as I passed her house as she put out the bins, asked me why she hadn't seen me clapping on my doorstep.

'I work for the NHS', I replied, wearily. She gave me a round of applause.

It was the easiest thing to say but inside I felt like an utter fraud. I could not and still cannot find words to encapsulate my gratitude for my colleagues who worked through this, but 'claps for the NHS' made me feel like I was benefitting from the positives without experiencing the negatives.

But it was hard.

In other times of such turmoil in my life, bereavements, sickness, I have turned to my friends and colleagues for support and have been offered this back. Now, it felt like we were all going through a collective bereavement.

People were seeing friends and family get sicker. Even those whose families and networks were not directly affected, felt the grief of a loss of expectations and hopes.

Birthdays were cancelled, religious festivals like Easter, Passover, Eid and Diwali – and eventually, Christmas, were cancelled. The hopes we had and the expectations that we had were lost. Normality has changed. We are of a generation which will never know what it's like not to fear a pandemic as a reality in the future.

But amid the despair, the endless spring mornings which seemed to be clothed in a shroud of morning dew which brought with it a lack of hope. A sameness that left a dull numb feel when the same streets were pounded every day for that spark of light, we did, perhaps find new ways to survive.

I reconnected with two of my oldest friends. Initially a telephone chat, became a zoom chat and then became a scheduled weekly zoom chat. Through the highs and lows, through the loss, rediscovery of why the friendship was there in the first place, through honest discussions about values, racism, our own families and practices, we reconnected in a way that would never have been possible from a point of meeting a couple of times a year, to speaking for an hour and more, every week.

We found consolation in the smallness of my physical world. The parks near my house, the communities which I inhabited. I even explored finding new communities in which to involve myself in. We found that 'community' can have many different meanings, physically and virtually, when we surround ourselves with people who can support us.

It has also helped me because more aware of where the gaps in community are, and how we can bridge them. It isn't always possible but an awareness of where and who is missing in the communities we form has always been as important that those within them.

'Leave no one behind', we can say it but we need to know who the 'no ones' are before we can ensure they are not left behind. There are the local facebook groups, the NextDoor groups, the faith groups, the hobby groups. Social media, for all it's known ills, can be a source of great comfort as well, and the benefits cannot be overlooked again for those who cannot engage 'offline'.

I wasn't able to focus on knowledge acquisition, reading became difficult as my concentration faded and I managed to fill my evenings with 'television that wasn't the news' in an attempt to switch off. I'm not the 'Shakespeare writing King Lear' type. I'm the 'getting through Schitt's Creek and starting from the beginning as soon as I've finished' type' but finding the 'happy places' is a precious thing and knowing what makes them happy places, even more so.

Maybe we each had more chances to find ourselves. I have missed so much. People, friends, family, places. Hopes, expectations, time. 2020 will, to me, be a year filled with fear, pain, distress and confusion. But it will also be a year I rediscovered what it is to be a part of something much bigger. What is it to live through history and see the world unfolding. To see sadness, despair and fear and to live through it.

When asked about my greatest accomplishment in 2020, I think I'd say 'getting through it'. I'm a mental health professional, maybe I should be stronger or more hopeful. I have shown my fear and vulnerability this year in ways that I had not expected to.

I know that each day I get through, is a day nearer to this year being a memory, a day closer to knowing I have got through it. Yes, with loss, with pain but it means that the 'next' will be better. We cannot understand the joys of having if we have not experienced the depths of not-having.

**“2020 will, to me, be a year filled with fear, pain, distress and confusion. But it will also be a year I rediscovered what it is to be a part of something much bigger”**

I have learnt what good leadership, on a local level and on a larger, national and supra-national level can look like but more sharply, what bad leadership looks like. I have learnt to be cautious of 'facts' presented without evidence. I hope I was always that way inclined, but this year has made me much more suspicious about what 'truth' is.

My plans, my expectations, my hopes have changed. Here, in December, we don't know what will be waiting for us in the new year, and on balance, I think I would rather not know. I don't think I could have got through this far, if I had known, in March, I would be where I am now. That we would be where we are now. But we know, each day, is a day closer to the end of this, and that's as much as we can do to get through it.

This 2020 has been a year clouded in fear, anxiety and sadness. I think there is a communal trauma which we experience but as well, many many different individual traumas that we are all experiencing.

I try to think about what will come next, both for myself and for my work, as someone working in mental health. I see the changes around me, but I know it is not something I can depersonalise either. This is our trauma. This is an event which will define our nation. We will never not know fear. We will never not know how quickly our expectations and our lives can be changed. This may not be a bad thing, but it will always be 'a thing'.

Regarding moving on, the only way I can get through it is by taking each day, without expectations, without putting pressure on myself, at the very least, and seeing each day that I finish, that I complete as an accomplishment which takes me nearer being able to see this as 'the past'.

**Anonymous**

3 January 2021

## “I just want to be alone ”

He comes home from one job, eats then leaves for the next. He was furloughed then laid off. He now has 3 different jobs. I have 2 jobs.

Monday to Wednesday I am myself. I go out to work, I come home and forget work. I become mummy, house keeper, cook, educator.

Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday I am mummy, mummy, mummy, mummy. That's it! Just mummy. She is 2 and I am her world.

I know I am meant to tell you she is my world. I can not. I can however say.....

I am fed up to the back teeth of Mr bloody tumble. I would rather stick pins in my eyes than once again have to deal with the mess of glitter and glue and paint and stickers that get stuck on everything apart from what they are meant to be stuck on.

“Bake with your baby”

“Sing songs with your baby”

“It's the best job in the world”

What!?! Listening to her screaming “I want up” “I want tubbies on” “I want my pink cup” is the best job in the world is it???

Right that's it! We're going out!

But then it hits me like a tone of bricks. We are in Tier 4! We can not go out! We can not anywhere because we might catch it then die or, unbeknown to us, pass it on to somebody else and then they will die!

JESUS! I feel like I'm suffocating!

I can't breathe. I want him to feel how I am feeling.

I am so worn out from being mummy, mummy, mummy that I want to close my eyes right here, right now!

I want to lay my head down and close my eyes and sleep for 100 years!

He is home for his lunch. I quickly run up the stairs and get into bed. Head on pillow, quilt right up to my ear.

“I'm going in 5 minutes”

“I don't give a shit! I'll take one minute if that's the only opportunity I get to be alone!”

Now she's coming up the stairs! My heart is pounding and the panic sets in again. Am I afraid of my own child?

**“I can't breathe. I want him to feel how I am feeling”**

“Mummy? What your doin” “mummy, play” “mummy, I found you!”

I was not aware that we were playing hide and seek. How has my sheer desperation to hide away become a game? Dam! I should have sat on the loo instead! Then again, I can't remember the last time I went there alone!

**“I miss the way you spin around and around and I miss the little dance you do when you hear the music to your favourite song”**

What I wouldn't give right now to be invisible!

I just want to be alone. That's all I want. Just. Leave. Me. Alone. PLEASE!!!! Please God make this child take a nap or, make his shift be cancelled or just make me invisible. Christ! You made blind men see! Is invisibility so difficult?

It's only Friday. I still have Saturday and Sunday to get through. I can't do it. I honestly just can't do it. Please god just give me the strength to get through till Monday.

I never really prayed until till I became a mother. Now I pray on a daily. Multiple times!

He's gone and I'm back on my hands and knees cleaning up another accident.

Only it wasn't an accident was it? You threw it on the floor because it was a strawberry yogurt and not a raspberry yogurt.

“Right! Time out!”

Truth is, time out is more exhausting than just cleaning it up and getting you the raspberry yogurt. I don't have the physical energy to carry you up the stairs to your cot for said time out and the time out spot we started out with, also became a game. So, time out is generally avoided at all costs.

Count down to 19.00hrs started at 06.30 when you decided we would get up. Roll on bedtime.

You are safe in your cot, sleeping. I am sat on the sofa, toys all around me. Dirty dishes stacked up in the kitchen.

My reward for getting through the day is having the TV to myself. I am flicking through every channel but there is nothing on. The telly is noisy and bright. I switch it off. I sit in the quiet darkness.

I....

I miss you!

I miss your sticky fingers pulling at my sweater.

I miss the way you spin around and around and I miss the little dance you do when you hear the music to your favourite song.

I miss you saying mummy!

Thank you god for making me a mummy. Please let us both wake up in the morning and continue to keep us safe. Amen.

P.S. God bless him too x

# “I felt an immense sense of pride to be an active part of such a national crisis”

I've been employed with the NHS since 2001 from the age of 21 freshly qualified. My interest & passion always lay with mental health even as a student,

I've never looked back or ever considered leaving a job in mental health for the NHS.

Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic this year, I have been working for the past 6 years at least as a care co-ordinator in community mental health teams, many of which have undergone various transformations over recent years.

When I was told I was to be redeployed to the trust identified covid/isolated in patient wards, there was an initial sense of reservation & uncertainty, but more powerfully I felt it was my calling & duty. It was my responsibility as a NHS frontline key worker & I felt an immense sense of pride to be an active part of such a national crisis.

I had the privilege to be part of a wonderful team looking after acutely unwell people both psychiatrically & physically who needed us at their most vulnerable time.

I gained confidence in my ability to work effectively and autonomously as a professional clinician, gaining additional clinical skills & knowledge & utilising my established experienced and specialised occupational therapy skills.

I was redeployed to the inpatient ward within the trust, which was reconfigured to isolate those patients with suspected or confirmed cases of covid-19, and where possible, to provide separate facilities for this patient group.

I was redeployed from my substantive full time post as community care co-ordinator to support additional staffing needs of in patient wards.

Being redeployed, I felt pressure to effectively and quickly adapt and respond with multiple changes and innovations. I quickly had to learn & adapt to new & unfamiliar ways of working including reconfigurations of teams, including my substantive community team during my absence.

I felt extremely anxious & worried for my caseload of community patients whom had no prior warning or communication with or from me of these changes & my redeployment, which created great anxiety and sense of uncertainty for those clients & fragmented support in their care.

**“I felt extremely anxious & worried for my caseload of community patients”**

6 January 2021

## “My anxiety went through the roof”

At the beginning of the Pandemic Lockdown I was already depressed and suffering from anxiety & the knowledge that there was a virus out there taking lives my anxiety went through the roof. Self isolating was not really a problem for me as I more or less isolate myself because of my mental health issues. As a bipolar sufferer it is not very easy to keep up with relationships around people if you are manic or feeling low. But the fact that it was compulsory is what made me mad. My levels of paranoia went up and I had so much more traffic racing in my head that i had to self medicate for peace sake.

Anonymous

7 January 2021

## “Following a serious brain injury I live in isolation”

My emotional and mental health was exactly the same as it is now, the only give away that there is a pandemic is when I peek through my curtains and see everyone is wearing face masks, and very rarely watch the news, following a serious brain injury I live in isolation as mixing with people and that includes friend / family general public just causes as in the words of the DWP “Overwhelming psychological distress” which really does say it all, so Covid or no Covid really has no affect on my mental state what so ever, if on the rare occasion I have to venture out and I contracted the virus I can say I am not remotely concerned except I would not want to pass it on to someone who enjoy’s being on this planet, there is some comfort in my life/sentence and that is strong medication that knocks me out, the only time I get a rest from severe clinical depression and anxiety, I will leave it there as that is all I have put in my diary entry for today, I wish anyone suffering mentally that hopefully you turn a positive corner thanks.

Anonymous



7 January 2021

# “I can't wait to see the end of this killer covid 19”

How has your emotional and mental health been affected by the coronavirus pandemic?

Very very badly as i was unable to visit one of my brother in law who was in hospital dying of bowel cancer, due to this covid 19 pandemic i couldn't hugged him or gave him a proper farewell in which whenever i think of that it makes me very upset. I can't wait to see the end of this killer covid 19 so that we can have a better life and see our families and love ones again.

Anonymous

7 January 2021

## **“I’m not in the black hole of my youth, but on the flatlands surrounding it”**

The pandemic. The only experience that comes close for me is the lost year I had as a teenager, when, during months of brutal treatment for cancer I descended into a black hole of - nothing. Fear of death, despair at having all the things that made me myself - at that time my studies, friendships, appearance, boundless energy - were all suddenly gone, replaced by a universe of nausea, pain, hair loss, weight loss, lack of sympathy from neighbours who derided me as ‘scrawny’ and doctors that told me to ‘pull myself together’ (this was 1980, preceding the Teenage Cancer Trust and the recognition of what this sort of trauma does).

Four decades on I have blotted out almost all memory of this time, my day-to-day life, my emotions, so traumatic was it. All I remember is a numb blankness and the hollow despair of depression.

This time, more mature, self aware and not (yet) ill, but told to shield because of my medical history (something I haven’t completely done because I need to take what small joys are still available - walks, with others when permitted; a visit to a pub garden or outdoor theatre, where permitted, a trip to the shops, so I can exercise control over what I eat rather than have others do it.), I count my blessings. Many many are suffering more deeply, trapped in poor housing, bereaved, sick, broke, unemployed,

**“emotional suppression  
lets me function and be  
present for my family,  
my colleagues”**

But I muse on this second lost year in a limited human lifespan. My brush with cancer taught me to grasp life with both hands. Every day filled with work, friends, travel, books, film, arts, hiking, fitness, then children, trips abroad to my European family. never dull, always enriching. But now....all is flat once more. I’m not in the black hole of my youth, but on the flatlands surrounding it. I will try not to fall in. Cancer trauma also taught me mind control - how to get through by blotting out reality. Not sure this is healthy but it’s how I have coped.

This time I blot it out not by descending into an abyss of numbness but with distraction. I escape into other worlds via books, film - images from another age, where people gather, fight, laugh and bother and please each other. I am lucky - I work online, and I cherish those Zoom calls where a few months ago they tired me out. My colleagues are upbeat, intelligent, my work is stimulating. I am very lucky. But the sense of doom descends again every time I switch the camera off. I swallow hard and force my mind into some other world - something online, a news item about anything other than the pandemic, a quick walk outside to kid myself that the antics of the local cats or squirrels matter. If I stop and let the real world in, anxiety washes over me. Pressure builds behind the eyes, tears threaten to spill, throat tightens, thought processes become chaotic and disordered. I can’t let the panic in.

I am fearful for my children, of the impact, of what they feel. A lost teenage year for them too. One is angry, defiant, aggressive, the other compliant, soft and too protective of our feelings rather than his own, I fear. I can’t let the panic in though. I jolly them along, nag them about schoolwork while fearing none of it will end up mattering or meaning anything. Keep up the pretence that it’ll blow over by the next birthday, by Christmas, by half term, well surely by the summer. I stress the optimism (vaccines!), play down the threat (‘don’t worry about mutations of the virus - vaccine scientists can tweak the jab!’ - this said jauntily to my younger son whose brow has furrowed over a news report on the radio).

This emotional suppression lets me function and be present for my family, my colleagues. I sleep well after the first weeks of wakefulness - I have become adept at self deception to give my mind some peace. But anxiety erupts in the form of cold sores, eczema, weird itching.

The brief respites from the restrictions have been hugely important. They've allowed me and my friends and family a brief glimpse at normality, at the things that make us who we are - we've grabbed at the opportunity. Lots of walks (all my photos from this year seem to be of people in muddy fields), rule-of-six picnics and BBQs in park or garden, a few meals out in beer gardens (never indoors no matter the chill), even a trip to meet long-unseen family in a cottage in the country over the summer (I'm fearful I may never see my elderly parents again - they live in Ireland and we can't travel even if we felt confident enough to, which we don't; I stuff his thought back in its box sharpish).

Our community has also come up trumps - we all have a cheery socially-distanced drink on our street (restrictions permitting) each Friday at 6. We sang (socially-distanced) carols on the street on xmas eve, with one family placing a life-affirming firepit outside for all to enjoy. We let off fireworks on November 5 and new year's eve in our front gardens and everybody stood by their doors to watch. We share memes, help and hilarity on our whatsapp groups. This is a wonderful thing to have come out of the catastrophe. Strangers greet each other; we are solicitous when we move to avoid each other in the street, being sure to make eye contact and smile - 'it isn't personal, just want us to be safe'. This makes me feel resilient. For now.

**Anonymous**

## “Changing my perspective from ‘buried’ to ‘planted’”

When COVID-19 hit I was already in hospital and had been for 3 months. Not a normal type of hospital, it was an eating disorders unit, not a normal type of patient (ill - wanting to get better), I was fighting the system, held against my will. Indeed when I arrived on the unit I honestly thought it was a joke and then when I was then sectioned I thought I was in a bad dream and refused to take off my coat or shoes for the first 3 days, I slept on top of the bedsheets and didn't unpack for 2 weeks because I thought if I wake up I want to be ready to leave straight away. The fact that I was in a wheelchair for the first few weeks was probably the only thing that stopped me trying to run away. The trauma of the admission lingered for many weeks. On one occasion many weeks later as I settled in I went to sleep and woke up but thought I was back at home and to find myself still on the unit was incredibly distressing. However, the staff were very kind and the specialist eating disorder consultant who I had long admired from afar was exceptional in her care and understanding but subsequently made some promises about my treatment which the pandemic completely trashed.

Re-winding - slightly....2019 hadn't been a good year for my health either mental or physical - I had already been in a medical hospital on a section in the July for re-feeding and things slid down from there so even though this admission felt to me like a complete joke to everyone else around me it was inevitable - even back in July.

So mid-December to mid-March, under section my treatment gradually worked towards more independence and more trust off the ward ready for discharge. I started having weekends at home in preparation for discharge in mid-April. However, I cheated the system, my weight had plateaued from end of January and I knew there was no way that by mid-April I would get to a healthy weight I did start to panic as I realised time was running out - I felt so stuck and conflicted as my discharge date got closer and the realisation that actually rather than cheating the system I had actually cheated myself finally dawned on me.

At the beginning of 2020 within the artificial bubble at the hospital we got word about this virus, we had to spend endless hours in the lounge after meals and watched the news but because we were in our own weird world it was hard to actually believe it. Until we literally had no choice.

At the beginning of March word got out that things were going to change BIG time, for all of us. We were told that other units had already closed but that wasn't going to happen here but we had day-patients as well as in-patients at the unit and there was a risk to the unit every time someone went outside and came back onto the unit. The potential for jeopardising the health of patients was a grave concern. Also staff on the ward were being pulled into other departments and other staff would suddenly go missing because they had to isolate due to contact with those who had been tested positive.

Then in the second week of March there were lots of meetings going on and rumours were spreading about what was going to happen. Then suddenly all the day patients pretty much in one day all went, never to return, not even the chance to say goodbye just gone. Some had been on the unit for months and then become day patients and now.....gone. Some of the day patients had meetings and were told that they now had to become in-patients and then for us in-patients we had meetings too.

**“At the beginning of March word got out that things were going to change BIG time, for all of us”**

Basically for those who were already having some home leave it was going to be run like this...go home and then come back once a week to have bloods done and be weighed and assessed then go home and come back again. That was pretty much it. So from 6 meals a day, therapy and group meetings and support to nothing but do come back and be weighed and have bloods done.

I was absolutely furious. There were no support meetings at all with OT or dietitian about how to manage and I was so angry when I heard this was the plan that I demanded to be allowed to leave straight away – a section 17 was hastily done and I left. I didn't even return later to pick up my stuff I got someone else to do that. I was so upset and angry, the only reason I had started to comply with treatment was because I had been promised full support to get back to a healthy weight and therapy to help me move on from the anorexia. (On the ward this was called 'full recovery' as opposed to 'personal recovery' which was for those who weren't ready for full recovery but had negotiated a healthier weight to get to before discharge) I wanted/needed full recovery, this was about my 9th time in hospital, this had been an issue for me from the age of 18, I was now 51, I was a mum of 2 teenage girls I had to be supported to get to full recovery – one of my daughters also had mental health struggles and was in a CAHMS unit from November to April so I was a carer too .....but it didn't happen at all.

**“It took a while for me to realise how massive the whole pandemic thing was and that maybe it wasn't the fault of the staff unit that they had had to clear the ward”**

On the ward I had seen people so much more relaxed around food than I was, almost enjoying it and whilst I would cry I would also wish to get to that place in recovery and believed finally it would happen for me too. Patients further on in their treatment would be sitting on a separate table away from the staff, laughing and chatting like pretty normal people..... when I left I was still on the supervised table, sometimes in tears, sometimes having liquid nutrition as I hadn't finished the food in time I never got to the place I thought I would get to. So when I left I had a lot of mourning to do for what I thought would happen and for what I believed now never would.

It took a while for me to realise how massive the whole pandemic thing was and that maybe it wasn't the fault of the staff unit that they had had to clear the ward, that people were dying of COVID-19 and the whole of the NHS was on its knees. I suppose all I could see was that I had had my dreams of full recovery completely

squashed and now I would never ever get to where I wanted to be.

Looking back part of the problem was the unit didn't explain the pressure they were under by the powers that be to clear the ward of anyone they possibly could and they had probably panicked. The consultant was on annual leave too so not there to manage the situation and to be fair she did contact me a lot to offer me support after I left.

However, I was so angry and upset still, it took me a long time to calm down at all. I put a lot of trust into the system which I felt had been totally misplaced, I felt as if I had been lied to and the way my leaving had been mishandled meant that I was reluctant to take even the piecemeal support that was later offered. I was just not interested.

I thought that after so long struggling, since my teens that this was finally going to be the end and that this was going to be it and I would be free at last, that was what had been promised and agreed but worse than that I had been 'thrown under a bus'.

Over the next few months it was clear to me how huge COVID-19 actually was. I had to muddle through myself and in a weird kind of way I was so anti the ward that I ate just to keep out of the system, I was still under a section on a long leave section 17 so I was not free from the ward just away from it. But my eating was all over the place and I certainly wasn't recovered.

I kept myself over-busy with jobs in the house and garden, I joined a sewing group and made over 100 laundry bags for NHS worker uniforms just keeping my mind occupied and in that I found a real release but my mind was contaminated by the trauma of being ill, being in hospital and then the sudden 'abandonment'.

I had CAT therapy with my therapist from the unit over zoom but more often than not I wouldn't have my camera on OR I would have my camera on and would wear a face mask so my face couldn't be seen. I was pretty determined that my therapist wouldn't have any clue about what was happening to my weight – as far as I was concerned if I wasn't going to get support with that when on the unit then why should I let them know how things were going now I was off the unit.

CAT carried on for the rest of 2020 and into 2021 but it was marred by my anger at the system, my inability to be honest about how things were going and a panic about what might happen if I was more honest.

Having said that being back home certainly did feel good. Back with my family and my puppy and in our own bubble we muddled along, My elder daughter didn't have to do GCSE exams which was a plus but we mourned the loss of her graduation and end of year ball with her -both done via zoom – not quite the same!! As a parent I also had to navigate my younger daughter leaving a CAHMS unit after 5 months and getting her into a special school into year 10 after completely missing year 9 but though all of this I have realised what an incredible husband I have, he completely stepped up when I fell down as a mother so dramatically.

The other area that I have had to try and re-navigate in 2020 due to the pandemic is my place in the world. Before the dramatic downturn in my mental and physical health I was a social entrepreneur having set up a charity working in schools with literally 100s of families of 11-17 year olds. So whilst navigating a rather haphazard return to normality with my health I was also trying to fight for the survival of the charity which I had poured my heart, soul and all my savings into over the last 7 years. With schools closed from March and their tentative re-opening in September I have seen years of hard earned relationships with schools slip through my fingers like sand through a sieve. I have gone from finally almost having enough money coming in to pay myself to no money coming in and receiving Universal Credit.

I feel that although 2020 seem to bury the charity I grew from nothing and my chance of full recovery I need to keep hope alive and change my perspective from 'buried' to 'planted'. To give the future a chance because for every end there is always an opportunity for a new beginning.

**Elise Pacquette**

# “No one I knew had died but it consumed me”

It was exciting at first: solidarity, community, connection.

A novelty.

Opportunity.

A chance to prove and demonstrate my resilience.

Everything was flipped upside down yet we found new ways, new paths and a new satisfaction.

“It’s just a few months right?”

But by early summer it faded.

Drifted so far from what we had first created;

Shattered into tiny pieces.

Was this what life was now: soulless, frustration, cold.

The work had built up, virtual fun was far from it and I suddenly felt

Alone.

People close and far were dying, death was just the norm now.

Numbers were chilling

But dehumanised so far from the front line and the

Grieving families.

I sent 3 bouquets of sympathy flowers.

The smallest of gestures when a funeral cannot be fully held.

The power of touch

A simple hug, clutch of the hand, a handshake

All vanished. And nothing would compromise.

Again, alone.

The closeness of death was suffocating. The news, my friends, my family, colleagues. But no one I directly knew had died.

But why did I feel so

Overwhelmed?

Imagery resurfaced and flashed from eye to eye,

Suppressed from a tragic incident years ago.

Distracting and haunting. The imagery stayed, unwelcomed and dominant.

Day and night.

I felt selfish.

No one I knew had died but it consumed me and I was

Stuck.

My chest would tighten from deep within.

A rash would decorate my skin.

I couldn’t concentrate.

Dreams taunted me.

Wake up like a bus had hit me.

Tears cascaded down my cheeks.

What was this? I was meant to be resilient, had I  
Failed?

Pulled aside, I heard the gentle words “it’s ok not to be ok, does your work have a hotline?”  
I called:  
“Hello ..”

Against my former beliefs, it’s the bravest thing I’ve ever done.  
Each conversation, private, not selfish, not indulgent but  
Cure.

I listened. I reflected. I set boundaries to  
Protect myself.  
This upset some.  
That hurt. But others  
shone.  
They were there. Above and beyond.  
I never felt alone.

2020 has shaken our very core.  
Our beliefs, dreams and comforts have been thrown up into the foggy sky.  
Landed in an unfamiliar mosaic.  
Yet, this unfamiliar territory offers us a chance to learn.

I never knew that  
to be brave  
Is to experience, learn, change and  
protect.  
To be resilient  
Is to keep going.  
One foot in front of the other.

So, we return to the same orders but this time  
I am brave  
And  
I am resilient.

One foot in front of the other.

**“My chest would  
tighten from deep  
within.  
A rash would decorate  
my skin.  
I couldn’t concentrate.  
Dreams taunted me.  
Wake up like a bus had  
hit me.”**



## “I needed to ‘dig deep, and then deeper’”

One thing I learned from 2020, from March onwards, was I needed to ‘dig deep, and then deeper’.

With the first onslaught of the Covid 19 virus, like many people I was afraid. I am over 70 and in the range of ‘statistics’ and know I needed to stay safe.

I had no idea what that REALLY mean until lockdown came into force.

I am a social person, have many friends, a large family and just re-kindled a relationship. I was often out, coffee, lunches and staying over with family and friends.

Then - nothing.....

After a deep breath, I started to make a list of what I wanted to do around the house and garden (and believe me I am grateful for my garden), planting, changing things around, do some decorating in the house, several things to do and keep me busy and occupied. There were, and still are, lots and lots and lots of Facetime, phone calls, texts with jokes etc., and sometimes that was overwhelming and therefore I put my phone on silent for the major part of the day, just checking during the day in case of emergencies.

I started to dig in my garden and realised I had got to ‘dig into my mind too. I started to do online courses, The Tudors, Ballots for Women, History subjects that I have always enjoyed.

**“i sobbed, I spent a day in bed and my girls called but I lied, I told them I was fine”**

By week 7, when Lockdown lifted, it was like another Spring, to meet friends BUT NOT HUG, to have a coffee, a lunch, meet outside with 6 people, all seemed so exciting.

In my head, I’m sure part of it has shut down, the part of the emotions that can lead to depression. It’s like lying to myself, that ‘this is great’.. coffee with a friend despite the fact that I had to cancel a holiday to see my daughter in Jersey.

I dug deep in my garden, I dug deep around the house, by week 7 I had finished updating, changing, decorating so the slight release was a sigh of relief until...

Lockdown 2 and to realise that my visit to two of my 3 daughters over Christmas was cancelled and the third one wasn’t allowed to visit me between Christmas and New Year.

I cried, i sobbed, I spent a day in bed and my girls called but I lied, I told them I was fine, I couldn’t even cope with them worrying about me when they were trying to manage working at home, looking after and self-schooling children.

What was my disappointment in comparison to theirs?

I will tell you what my disappointment was - it was real, it was real and painful to me, it was MY disappointment, no one elses and I was entitled to it. I didn’t need to share it, I wanted to wallow in it for as long as it lasted and I did.

I have suffered depression in the past and was on mild medication and I know the signs when it comes tapping on your shoulder. I felt the signs one day and it scared me.

I decided to, very consciously, to take a change in my life and turn it around.

Yes, I am going to dig deep, but not in a woe is me kind of way, but 'How lucky are you?' with loving caring people around you, and I listed the things I am truly grateful for.

And it was a long list, and I kicked myself up the backside, because I can mentally, and chose to move on and start to achieve.

Lockdown 3 - it's not 'here we go again', it's OK, bring it on..... next....and I won't/don't want to get beaten by this.

Walks, fresh air as often as I can and want too. If I don't want to walk, don't. I do not need to put any pressure on myself at all. That way I can enjoy these quiet times.

**Anonymous**

11 January 2021

## “Somehow with each wave of poor mental health I carry on marching”

I have felt lost, lonely and isolated making my mental health a rollercoaster, some days are better than others, some I can be productive at work, I feel good about myself and how things are going, other days I can barely move myself from the bedroom. All of the things I used to do to manage my mental health well I cannot do and finding ways to manage feels impossible, yet somehow with each wave of poor mental health I carry on marching.

Lisa Stone

16 January 2021

## “I had always prided myself on my emotional resilience”

I had always prided myself on my emotional resilience. Always the one to put “the mask” on in order to smile, laugh and execute the day’s objectives in a timely, effective manner in a way that made work feel NOT like work. But the end of 2020 finally got me.

I broke.

Badly.

I am a NHS mental health nurse; and here was I, one of those individuals who is supposed to have the most insight and knowledge of tools that can help keep my mental health stable and healthy. But I broke.

Anonymous

# “Living through a pandemic with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder”

Living through a pandemic with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Imagine a life ruled by fear, fear you will be responsible for contaminating someone and they will die. Imagine a life where thoughts come into your head as rapidly, as savagely as walking into a wasps nest. What if I told you I had lived since the age of 15 with these fears, these constant, unrelenting barrage of thought after thought and now I am 38. What if I told you I have OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder)? Could you imagine a year in my life before this year? Could you imagine living with my brain in 2020 in a global pandemic? I would really like to tell you about it.

I was officially diagnosed in 2015 with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Due to thoughts where I need to prevent anyone being contaminated, and it being my fault, or preventing harm coming to others I have used avoidance. It started small, e.g. washing my hands before making someone a cup of tea. Then it got bigger and bigger. I stopped making tea for friends, if a builder was here I would offer the polite cup of tea only to make it 10 times, over and over. What if they have food allergies? What if the cup is contaminated? It will be my fault if they die. So I avoided more and more. Stopped people coming into my home, couldn't stay at friends houses. Couldn't see my old vulnerable grandparents. Couldn't go on a bus – what if I have a cold, what if someone is immunosuppressed, what if what if..

I used to smell gas and often report gas leaks. I couldn't sit with the fear that the whole street might blow up and it would be my fault. Soon I would stop going out of the house and or if I did I would cut off my senses. Not breathe through my nose so I wouldn't smell something I might worry about. I used to look down when walking so I didn't have to notice something I would go on to worry about. It is so hard explaining this to you, to do it justice just how life limiting it is.

**“I was thrown into having to make every decision on my own without anyone to check it with”**

I had come so far with my therapy in many ways. By 2019 I was more stable, more able to use Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to challenge my obsessions and compulsions. Sadly, in October 2019 my marriage ended abruptly and I was overnight left on my own. My partner of 15 years of marriage suddenly not there to ask the questions to gain respite from my thoughts of responsibility. This is known as 'reassurance seeking'. It was something I was challenging and trying to take responsibility for decisions. But I was thrown into having to make every decision on my own without anyone to check it with. I remember one morning putting bleach into the recycling bin to clean it outside.

I went and got the kettle and poured hot water into it. Steam rose and BOOM. My brain flooded instantly with 'What if I have just made a cloud of chlorine gas?', 'What if it travels over the village?'. 'What if my neighbours breathe in?'. 'It will be my fault that they die'. I couldn't go and ask my partner, they had gone. I shut the lid, cried so so much, my mind racing, followed by an extreme exhaustion that you can only explain follows that extreme anxiety. Have you felt that? When you are TERRIFIED, WORRIED, and after when the adrenaline leaves you, you are left exhausted. I pulled the curtains, put my ear plugs in, stopped breathing out of my nose, all to avoid the world and the next thought.

When I first heard of Coronavirus in February I remember feeling very scientific about the facts. I wasn't worried about it, it seems far away and I thought like with other viruses I and most people would be OK. Suddenly over night the news

changed and the focus was on our responsibility to not pass it on to the vulnerable. Wash your hands. Sing Happy Birthday twice. My thoughts went to 'It's our responsibility to be as careful as possible'. 'You just touched your face, if you don't decontaminate your hands you will pass it on to someone vulnerable and they will die and it will be your fault'. I started using hand gel excessively, wearing a face mask long before anyone else, not letting people in my home again. I had regular support workers and I wouldn't let them in, or go in their cars. Quite quickly I avoided one thing, and then the next, and the next...

My life became and has become more and more isolated. I was still using the bus in August, and then stopped as I didn't want to be asymptomatic and pass it on. I formed a support bubble with one friend as soon as we were able but only in December did I pop that bubble. I don't want the risk someone catching the virus will be my fault. I was able to use a taxi because weirdly if I was to have passed it on to someone I would never see, I atleast wouldn't know. But my neighbours, if I passed it to on them, and they died, it would be my fault.

Now its January 2021. I no longer leave the house other than to walk in the fields miles away from anyone. I regularly sterilise my gate, front door, packages. I wont let my neighbours go near my pets, just incase they have Coronavirus on their fur. But all my other thoughts have come back just as strongly. 'Have I turned the gas off?' 'Go back and check, and again and again, and again' 'If you haven't, the house which will catch on fire, which will catch the power cables alight, which will spread to all the houses, and they will all catch on fire, and many people will die and it will be your fault'. I can't send cards in the post, just incase I have contaminated them.

My life is now as wide as the four walls of my house, some days only my bedroom where I retreat and cut off my senses to try and have respite from the relentless hammering of thoughts.

So think of those of us diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder right now. Educate yourself about it if someone close to you has the condition. Don't create more stigma saying your 'a bit OCD' because you line your pens up on your desk. Yes you like order, yes it is important to you BUT does it limit your life? I have lost nearly everything now to OCD. Think of me, think of us.

This is a year in my life.

**Anonymous**

# “I’m tired of always having to juggle, and dropping at least some of the balls”

## 7th March 2020

I climbed onto the train, folded my scooter away, swung it up onto the luggage rack and slumped into “my” seat. Taking my helmet off and placing it on the table, I paused. How many surfaces have I touched? The train had a faint smell of hand sanitiser. I take mine out and squirt a blue puddle into my hands. The bottle reads “best before 2014” – the year my youngest was born. The train continued its stop-start journey into London, and the sense of unease is growing. The couple next to me sanitise their hands in silence. I decide to do mine again. A ripple effect of sorts. Does sanitiser stop working after its 2014 best before date?

## 12th March 2020

I’ve decided I’m working from home. I sip my coffee and relax into our study chair, laptop poised. I check the BBC, and then my phone. As I plan the next stages of my PhD, the days are mapped out in front of me, a balancing act of study, jogging, childcare and school runs.

## Still March 2020

We’re all at home. Four of us. “I guess I’ll teach the kids while you work?”, I say. “Lucky I can be really flexible.” There’s no hint of sarcasm in the word “lucky”, though I feel anything but. My mind flashes back to those long days with two tiny children. The freedom of waking up with a sunny day ahead and no set plans, the crushing lack of direction, every day the same. I hadn’t planned on going back to that.

## March 2020 continues

I haven’t gone back to that, anything but. When my alarm goes off at 6.15am my husband, ever the night owl, groans. I dress in the dark, and creep downstairs, all stealth undone by the mechanical whir of the coffee machine. I inhale the coffee, and listen to the quiet. My small piece of alone time. In the study, I painstakingly print off half a tree’s worth of worksheets and activities, plan outdoor learning, and read the national curriculum while also drafting a paper. I can totally do this for a month or two. Work-home school- work-sleep. It’ll be fine.

## April 2020

To my surprise the kids love home school and are flourishing. But I’m tired. I’m tired of squeezing in my work to unsociable hours, I’m tired of not finishing things to quite the standards I’d like. Most of all, I’m tired of always having to juggle, and dropping at least some of the balls. Tired of COVID, always at the back of my mind.

## May 2020

May comes and goes in a blur. There is home school, and half-term, which is like home school but without the structure. It is warm and we walk. Walk and walk and walk. But even the nicest of outings is still punctuated by hand sanitising or a sign saying “please don’t visit our village, we’re scared”. COVID is always there at the back of my mind. And I am still tired.

And then, sometimes, I had a few hours to work. Suddenly the cacophony of home school is replaced with the silence of my mind. Everything stops. I stare at the screen and try not to drown in the weight of what I have not done for the last

“The freedom of waking up with a sunny day ahead and no set plans, the crushing lack of direction, every day the same. I hadn’t planned on going back to that”

three months and what I likely won't be able to do for the next three. I try to press ahead in those small snatches of time, try not to be distracted by the BBC or Twitter reporting on just how bad it all is.

I try to remember "PhD student-me". For years I had happily sacrificed the work-me and replaced her with mum-me. But with the kids getting big, I had recently made a very conscious decision to find work-me again. I read a book on my commute, bought myself an overpriced coffee flask and lunch box, and sometimes went to cafes without needing to drag two kids to the loo or mop up spilled fruit-shoots. It was good.

### Summer 2020

Childcare in the summer holidays is a mixed blessing and for most of the summer, instead of relaxing in the sun and getting much needed vitamin D, I am in the study clawing back time lost during the first lockdown.

In between working we manage a holiday. Plans of far-flung places are replaced with wet, but character building, camping. We all needed the break, though COVID is still at the back of my mind. The holiday becomes tightly scheduled as we book all our activities and meals in advance, though I wonder how COVID-safe they are likely to be. In a lorry park on the edge of the M6 we argue about who last had the hand sanitizer. After a particularly cold and wet night in the tent, we spend the best part of an hour debating on whether we can go get a cooked breakfast in a café before deciding to "risk it". The queue outside the toilet block is reminiscent of the 11pm line waiting to get into a club. One in one out, as strangers chat about where they're from, and someone at the back gets rowdy, demanding to skip the queue.

**"we spend the best part of an hour debating on whether we can go get a cooked breakfast in a café before deciding to "risk it""**

### 3rd September 2020

Back to proper school and my youngest declares it's more exciting than being given a million sweets. They both go in happily and I sit and stare at my computer screen. 3pm seems both an eternity and a matter of seconds away. I pick the children up

from school and COVID is on my mind. I try not to treat the kids like biohazards.

### 11 September 2020

5am: Someone is coughing.

5.06am: "Can I come in your bed?" The government advice of keeping a distance and ask them to wear a mask if they can tolerate it, seems comical in the half-light.

5.10am: He wraps an arm around me, pulls back and grins. I can feel his warm breath, smell it, hear the slight rasping. He coughs in my face and kisses my nose. If he has it, I have it. I think about the plans I had for the day; analysis now replaced with admin. We'll have to cancel swimming lessons and drama classes, ring the school, book a test. Have we seen anyone vulnerable recently? Who else should I tell? I close my eyes and listen to him wheezing.

8.00am: We've watched 5 episodes of Teen Titans Go. There are no COVID tests to be found anywhere. I guess it's nearly time for home school.

### 15 September 2020

He's COVID-negative and feeling fine, so back to school he goes. But the disruption has thrown my week out. I am daunted by how easily plans are disrupted.

### 3 October 2020

Someone I know has COVID, and despite no contact it makes me nervous. We have family over at the weekend. What if I infect them? My chest feels tight with the weight of responsibility...or perhaps COVID. That afternoon I begin to cough.



I spend a while debating whether it is “tickly”. It’s almost imperceptible to the outside world, possibly more akin to “clearing your throat”. As I cook dinner, I notice it seems to have disappeared.

#### **4th October 2020**

After a good night’s sleep, I’ve decided the cough is psychosomatic or stress-related. I go for a jog. If I can run for an hour without coughing, and have no other symptoms, I reason I’m pretty unlikely to have COVID. As I pass another runner (at a distance) I wonder if they are also testing their lungs? Do other people do this? Is it as bad as testing your eye-sight?

#### **6 October 2020**

Just as we’re getting back on our feet, one slip up brings it all crashing down; quite literally. As I begin to think about picking the kids up from school, my husband is collecting tools and ladders from the shed. The next thing I know he’s up on the roof. And then...he’s not. I call the ambulance, bring him water, do the school run, check he’s OK, reassure the kids, sit with him, get the kids snacks, sit with him, ring the ambulance again, sit with him.

He is sent to minor injuries, query sprained ankle. Minor injuries send him to A&E, query broken heel. I get him a wheelchair, say goodbye at the door of A&E and roll him into the hands of another.

Then back to sorting the kids.

Once they’re in bed, I slump on the sofa. The cough has come back. I turn on the tv but watch my phone instead. Dinner is a lump of cheese and a tangerine; I can’t concentrate long enough to cook. I cry when I think about the walks we wont be able to go on, and then fret about who would feed the children if I got COVID.

#### **November 2020**

We settle into life with my husband on crutches. Now he can’t do the school run, or help in the morning. My husband can’t drive so I am now taxi for all 3 of them. No time to jog, no time to talk to friends, not enough time spent on the PhD. I feel suffocated, unable to leave the children with anyone now, not even my husband, and weighed down by yet more responsibility.

Christmas feels a lifetime away, but is a glimmer of hope. In the dark moments I count down the days until I can go to my parents and have a glass of wine while someone else cooks the dinner. I don’t count on it though. I order the “backup bird” for Christmas day. Just in case. The “backup bird” brings some much-needed light relief, but also reminds me it is the only bit of Christmas I have planned.

#### **December 2020**

As I listen to Boris give his announcement, selfishly I am devastated. I tell myself it’s just another day, and it is. Its another day that I have to make the breakfast, lunch and dinner, manage everyone’s emotions and expectations, battle the kids into clothes, battle them out of clothes and then battle them into beds. It really is just another day, and that’s the problem. I’m lucky, I tell myself. And I know it’s true. But in March I had the days mapped out in front of me, I had a plan, I had a juggling act I could manage. Now I feel like I always have a ball too many. Just as I master three balls, someone throws me a fourth. Sometimes, and without warning, that ball is on fire or made of lead. I make plans, but they are out of date and useless by the following day. I long for the predictability of the late running 7.11am to London Victoria; the human contact of the crush for the tube; my to-do list; and family planner packed full of 8th birthday parties, school trips and after-school clubs.

**“I cry when I think about the walks we wont be able to go on, and then fret about who would feed the children if I got COVID”**

21 January 2021

# “There’s a bitterness that comes with cover”

There’s a bitterness that comes with cover  
Plants wilt people return all with cover

Words are the heaviest of them all  
Each dhawaaq encompasses, drapes you with a cover

Opioids have seized my people by the nafs  
The shame suffocates you that is the final cover

A diaspora at war with itself  
how many mango poems till you deep there are some things you cannot cover

She dropped her garments, he left his clothes  
So many creative ways to shame for sickness, pride acts as post written cover

The strength of a drum that can call through time  
Festac Nigeria, Mudug baadiye and our elders with dementia all join by the string of a pounding cover

My ancestors wrote about winds that carry words and souls  
But we are left in their wake heel-less scratching our tongue of its cover

Calaakulli xaal we are but humans, laf and jiir and little else  
But then again maybe that’s because our xirsis are little more than covers

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*Dhawaaq*: pronunciation

*Nafs*: Soul

*Calaakullixaal*: in all circumstances

*Laf and Jiir*: bone and skin

*Xirsi*: amulet/protection (also my grandfather’s name)

Ibrahim Hirsi

# “My therapeutic experience of lockdown”

My therapeutic experience of lockdown.

On waking up on the first morning of lockdown in March 2020 a wonderful feeling of relaxation washed over me. Weeks of welcome unstructured time lay ahead to do with whatever I wanted.

I've loved the period of isolation. No external pressures or deadlines, everything “on hold”, no routine to keep, blissful solitude and so lovely and peaceful around here when all the pubs were shut and the noisy anti-social jobs locked down too!! So relaxing!

I have experienced mental health problems intermittently since childhood including severe depression, anxiety, phobias and at times OCD. I also have a mobility disability. I have always found participation in mutual support groups extremely beneficial and empowering and I am very pleased that I can still participate via the ever increasing number of these groups now available on Zoom and Face Book. Of course it will be good to meet face to face again when the pandemic is over but in the meantime I value the positive opportunities that I am experiencing with the social restrictions and lockdowns.

I have lived alone during the lockdowns but keep in touch with friends and relatives by phone and email which is fine until we can get together again later. I speak to neighbours occasionally including when we went outside for the weekly “Clap for the NHS” and the little boy next door painted me a rainbow to put in my window. I shop online for my groceries as usual.

When the first lockdown was lifted last summer I ventured out to a local hairdresser for a haircut but shampooed my hair before I went in order to keep physical contact to a minimum. I have walked to the post box a few times to post cards, and occasionally have gone to the local shops at times when it is quiet. I am deterred from going out regularly for exercise because of the increase in dangerous, abusive cyclists riding illegally on the pavements in spite of the fact that there have been very few cars around and the roads often empty.

The lockdowns and restrictions have given me the time to catch up with lots of things. I've sorted through decades of papers and documents that I'd stored from my numerous activities - campaigns, projects, politics, charities etc. and have so far disposed of over fifteen stones in the recycling bags! The rest which I am keeping - I've filed into neat order. I've done several free online short university courses with FutureLearn, including one about the Coronavirus so that I could understand it better. I've participated in online groups and webinars and taken part in lots of research surveys and interviews which I find so therapeutic. I'm also in some FaceBook chat groups for mental health and justice campaigns.

As everything went digital it's also been possible to continue with various campaigns and political activism. I could not go on the Black Lives Matter protests but I've been able to get involved in other ways. (I went on most of the anti-racism marches years ago). I'm also a member of my City Council's “Corporate Access Forum”. It exists to consult with and advise the Council about disability rights and access issues.

**“I have found the repeated advice from mental health organisations and from psychologists on TV both puzzling and annoying”**

I realise that others are not as lucky as me. I am retired so no worries about losing my job. I have a house and a little garden in my backyard and no dependants. My neighbours are not noisy. I feel very concerned for people who, unlike me, are adversely affected in numerous ways, and especially for those who caught the virus or lost loved ones. I keep constantly up to date with the news and reliable reports and government briefings.

I have found the repeated advice from mental health organisations and from psychologists on TV both puzzling and annoying. We are all unique individuals with individual circumstances and our experiences of the lockdown are therefore also different. Surely it is therefore both patronising and illogical to tell everyone to: “Read a book;” “Take up a hobby;” “Don’t listen to the news a lot;” “Stay in touch with friends and family every day” and (for me) worse of all – “Have a routine!” If people choose to do these things then they will. If not they will choose to do what is right for them. We are not children needing to be told what to do!

I have not accomplished as much as I would have liked to during the lockdown. I’ve still more papers to sort out and the website I do for our local church needs updating and developing. I also need to sort out some problems with my aging computer and update my Wi-Fi to keep up with a digitalised world.

I can understand why some people choose to drop out of society. I would not want to do so permanently but I find the temporary social isolation of the lockdowns therapeutic – although I have of course got my computer and Wi-Fi to keep me digitally connected!

**Anonymous**

## “The year that felt like a void”

The year that felt like a void

I am known as a outgoing and confident person who is social and full of fun. What I have described now feels like a former version of myself.

I am now quieter, less confident and I see myself in a negative way that I have never felt before. I question my actions and I question my thoughts.

Not having social contact with others has impacted on my mental health massively. I have a husband and two daughters yet I have times where I feel distant and alone. I feel being alone at times sometimes brings me comfort and escapism from life and people. It feels like I want to hide away. This can led to anxious thoughts that ruminate and I worry about the future and what will or will not happen.

I am a mental health nurse and yes I should be the one with the answers and the advice. For myself I feel there is nothing I can say to myself that is off use. In my job role I have witnessed the huge impact that the pandemic has had on everyone. It saddens me and its frightening.

When will this end?

**“Not having social contact with others has impacted on my mental health massively”**

**Anonymous**

## “COVID has made me realise what is important”

I am a depressive and in the first lockdown I experienced negative thoughts and anxiety. These were around thinking the world was going to end, that I would lose my job and income and lose my dream of an early retirement to France ( this was my goal that kept me going through depression and gave me something to work towards ). I worried about getting COVID, as I live alone how would I care for myself ? Who would look after my dog, I didn't have a will written.

I am a mental health first aider and was supporting a lot of people whilst trying to look after my own self care. After around 4 weeks after defining a very strict routine every day I began to enjoy not having the commute, the constant distraction and noise in the office and having to do work at home. I used to get up at 04:30 to take the dog to various dog minders before I drove to the station to get the train to London. I would get in around 6:30 and not eat until late and rarely had the enthusiasm and energy to do any exercise. I became very creative in lockdown and found new projects to try out, upholstery , mosaicing a glass table and others. I looked forward to each lockdown project and show casing it afterwards. It made me want to try other new things.

**“I am a mental health first aider and was supporting a lot of people whilst trying to look after my own self care”**

I had spend most of my life looking after others finally in lockdown I was making time for my own self care- meditating, exercising every day, preparing healthy meals, walking the dog twice a day, getting 8-9 hours sleep a night. I was more productive and focused at work. I started gardening and planting all sorts and eating my own organic produce.

For the first 6 weeks of lockdown it was tough and I gained 1.5 stone from comfort eating and drunk a bottle of wine a day at least. I then took a serious look at my health and how I wanted to enjoy my early retirement and I gave up booze for 90 days and switched to a plant based diet. I am calmer, less anxious , my physical health is good. I am scared to go back to work and my physical and mental health return to where they were pre covid. I don't miss people that much and feel I will be too comfortable in my

own company. I have removed things from my life that cause negativity such as toxic friends and relationships. I focus now on being as healthy as I can to prevent COVID infection or stand a better chance of recovery if I get it.

I don't want to return to work, I can do my job from home. If I have to go back to normal days in the office, I would find a way to retire early for own happiness and health. COVID has made me realise what is important and the things in life that were clearly damaging my mental health.

**Anonymous**

## “It was the year I turned 25, a quarter of a century old”

It was the year I turned 25, a quarter of a century old. I had decided New Year's Eve 2019 that this was going to be the year I travelled, got a new job and made something of myself. Nothing could stop me, apart from the world it would seem...

We all know the lockdowns and the COVID story itself, so I won't go too much into it. I remember showing up at the local pub for my bar shift and seeing the news. We had to close there and then. No one really knew how long for but I didn't expect to be writing this a year on, in the same position.

To begin with, the weather was good, I was out exercising, messing around at home and not realising how bad this pandemic was. I reached out to friends both old and new and felt like I was in a reasonably good headspace, without the stress of work and having lots of time with my family.

It was also the time I found love. A lockdown romance is never easy, but we made it work for the most part. The anticipation of being able to hold each other kept me going. During this time, I went back into care work to help where I could. This meant I was without my family for weeks at a time. It was so tough, but the work was so rewarding. At work, I didn't have time to worry or struggle with my confidence or low self-esteem which I have throughout my life.

After the first lockdown, I went home and was finally able to see this new girl I had become smitten with. Things progressed and I ended up travelling with her to her university house and staying for periods of time whilst working remotely. I was at the happiest I had been for a long time and I was reasonably thankful for lockdown for helping me find a new job and love. Things got tough when I was back home as we struggled to see each other, and this coincided with the return of my physical issues. For the last few years, I have been unable to naturally pass urine “the traditional way”. All my tests and appointments were cancelled at the hospital due to staff shortages and being needed elsewhere which I perfectly understood.

Unfortunately, this is where my 2020 spiralled downwards into a darkness I had never felt before. The year had moved at a rapid pace and by this time I was in November. I ended up rushed into hospital due to urinary retention. The stress and pain this caused meant I had to be catheterised which as a 25 year old man is not pleasant (I doubt its pleasant at any age actually). My relationship also broke down due to several reasons, so I was heading into Christmas without my partner and a tube in my doodle! Looking back now, it was the better outcome. What followed in the immediate aftermath of my relationship breakdown was cowardice social media messages from fake accounts and the correct services getting involved to help me. This has now stopped, and I am very thankful for that. It was not what I needed alongside these urinary issues. Over the run up to Christmas, I had countless issues with the catheters bypassing due to issues with infections. I tried self-catheterising numerous times and ended up with worse infections, causing me to be hospitalised on numerous occasions. I felt bad as the NHS are already short staffed and struggling with beds. The fact I could not have any visitors affected my mental health a lot as well. This mixed with the horrible messages saying how I was a burden and

**“ I felt bad as the NHS are already short staffed and struggling with beds. The fact I could not have any visitors affected my mental health a lot as well”**

worthless caused me to be helped by the in-house hospital liaison team for mental health. Due to my low self-worth and low moods, they referred me to the home treatment team. I was unfortunate that all these things had occurred in a short space of time and I was struggling to cope. I could not see any way out with the lockdown restrictions getting tighter and I was definitely not in the Christmas spirit. Luckily, my body gave me a break and I was able to enjoy Christmas with my family without any accidents or infections stopping me. My brother ended up getting a positive COVID test result, so we all had to isolate after this, until just after new year.

I have since had a suprapubic catheter fitted and am much better physically, awaiting a surgery to try something else. I am still having help with a therapist and I have applied for university. 2020 taught me a lot of things about myself and others. Without my family, friends and the workers that keep this country going, I do not think I would be sat here writing this now. For that I am thankful. I still have bad days, but we all do. I use services such as SHOUT, Clic and Mindline, when I need help or support and I also try to talk things through more. With the vaccines now being rolled out, we can finally start looking forwards, even if it is just one day at a time. Things can and will get better. If you are reading this, you can get through the bad days, and the best thing is you will appreciate the better ones more.

**Nick Hughes**



15 February 2021

## “It was a weird year 2020”

It was a weird year 2020, I think we can all admit that. In some ways I had the most challenging days in my life in it, and my most happiest days of life. On my most darkest challenging days I was stuck alone with my thoughts. Nothing to distract them. I came face to face with the fact that I was abused as a child. This started the grief process which was full of emotional ups and downs. But in 2020 I had time to listen to my body and me. For the first time I was truly listening to what I enjoyed, who I am? I made many self-discovery moments. But I also had days of extreme loneliness and depression, where I felt there was nothing to get me out of bed. As I couldn't see an end in sight, the worries of my future were constant, what happens if this, how am I going to cope, I'm scared. But right now I have never felt more alive and hopeful for the future. In 2020 we decided to move to a new city. The change was good, and those are some of my happiest days of my life, being given this second chance, I grew in confidence. I came out too as a lesbian in 2020 which has been a journey for me. I'm starting to feel more peace at myself. But I have also felt this anger, this regret. I should have spent more time with that person, I've missed out on this and that. And this feeling of this is so unfair I'm missing out on my teenage lives. But I feel we are going to be better prepared for life as we have discovered so much about ourself, and found that we can cope.

**“For the first time I was truly listening to what I enjoyed”**

**Amy Kinnings-Smith**

17 February 2021

## “Feel so lonely and know I’m not the only one”

### “No chance to grieve”

[The pandemic has] massively affected me. I’ve had anxiety and depression for many years and have struggled at times but the last year with lockdowns has increased these symptoms so much it’s devastating. My fiancé died from Cancer early March 2020 2 wks before our wedding. Then we went into lockdown I could only have 13 people at his funeral and no wake afterwards. No chance to grieve been living in almost permanent lockdown since. I’ve been wfh which I am lucky to be able to do but now am anxious to go out and not seen anyone except my son for almost a year. My mental health currently is in a bad way I have to wait another 5 months for counselling and have physical symptoms too. Have a face full of acne and I’m in my 40’s!! Feel so lonely and know I’m not the only one there are so many of us. It worries me how long this will go on for. I cry a lot and the sadness has taken over.

Anonymous

# “How the Pandemic Affected my Life!”

I wasn't doing so well health-wise before this pandemic started.

When I first heard about it, I was totally terrified. I live on my own in sheltered housing. I didn't have any support to start with and was really struggling with the pandemic lockdowns and my depression got worse. I had a breakdown.

I'm now under my local Community Mental Health Team and have a Care Plan now. I'm also on anti-depressant medications as I went through a stage in my life which caused me to now want to continue. So this was a very personal time for me and I did not wish to live any more!

The pandemic made it worse for me. The lockdowns brought a lot of sad memories to me of when I got locked in through my abusive ex-husband, which caused me to have night-terrors and being scared to go outside and be around other people. My anxiety is very high now and it's a constant battle trying to keep safe. I am so scared that other people might give me the virus and I just feel so alone and sad knowing that all around the world so many people have sadly passed away. Our world feels so scary just now. I'm so scared and fearful about what my future will have in store, now. Will we have to live forever in and out of guidelines and lockdowns?

The social isolation is very hard. I don't know a lot of people but the ones I do, I've not been able to see often and it's so upsetting the global crisis is sad and very worrying. What will happen all around the world? I've wrote a poem about the pandemic (see below).

I ended up in hospital in September/October 2020 with organ failure with my pancreas. It was very serious. I was so scared of getting the virus in hospital. But the staff were amazing and they deep cleaned the wards daily, tested the patients on the wards and looked after us extremely well. Bless the NHS. They are our heroes. I can't thank them enough. Amazing people! Thank you!

I was given a support package for Home Help for 4 weeks from the British Red Cross upon discharge. They did my shopping and light housework for me. Fantastic people. I enjoyed the company as well. Then when they were gone, I was alone again.

Having to venture outside in lockdown was a terrifying experience which I will never forget. I'm always on guard now, keeping away from people outside. I am so paranoid now. I was introduced to the company Mind in my local area. They are amazing (my angels). Mind set up therapy for me once a week which is helping me dearly, as I progress onwards.

There is also a Support Worker who checks in with me and they are now a dear friend, who I can't thank enough for helping me through some hard days and times in this dreadfully scary pandemic. Even a phone call means a lot. When Christmas was cancelled for “2020” I was so sad and lonely. I was completely alone. I'll never forget it. I'm finding life is just one long struggle at the moment and I hope life will get better soon for all of us, once again.

**“I live on my own in sheltered housing. I didn't have any support to start with and was really struggling with the pandemic lockdowns”**

My mental health is all over the place each day and so different at the moment. I just kept doing my prayers and hoping that my dear Lord will help me get through everything that's happening. I'm just trying to be strong and carry on.

### **Life in the Covid-19 Pandemic (2020) - Poem:**

I have a weird feeling of disorientation when I go outside these days,  
It's like waking up from a very long sleep to find the world irreversibly changed.  
A troupe of Science Fiction, from Day of the Triffids, or the blinding meteor shower,  
going into London transformed, in '28 Days Later'.  
Except the weird thing is, not the London of a year ago,  
and still ongoing eerie empty streets, empty streets. shops closed, some shops open, some traffic has resumed  
its flow, and some people are still meeting up.  
People blast music from their cars etc,  
Groups meet in parks.  
But most people stay indoors.  
But our world is still in a scary place.  
Am I mad to wonder?  
To still feel nervous?  
Some people forget the pandemic is still with us. People need to take notice.  
We have new variants of the virus now and it's spreading more each day.  
If we don't take actions now, our world will be on its way  
to another major disaster.  
And all of our lives will be harder still.  
Depression is living in a body that fights to survive  
With a mind tries to die (this is me).

**Helen McGregor**

## “I truly felt lost in the world”

Over the past year of 2020/21, my mental health personally has changed drastically.

The start revolved around March when it was announced schools would close, drawing a sharp close to my 2 years spent revising for my a-levels, which took a toll as I felt I'd wasted the 2 years struggling for nothing. My university applications fell through later on when I received my results further adding to my loss of hope for the future. I truly felt lost in the world, I had no ambitions to do anything and spent many weeks isolating myself away from family and others doing nothing.

There eventually came a time where I started to feel bad about myself and tried to make a change to my life, I began to search for a job and that has still gone nowhere, I saw peers and old friends snapping up jobs like nothing and yet here I was struggling to even see a response from a company never mind an interview. Yet again the light was fading in my mind, yet again I hid away because not trying meant I would never see the failure of my actions.

But nothing would prepare me for the results of those actions, relationships I had become strained and I split up with my girlfriend, I lost touch with friends I was tight-knit with, all I could do was cry and look at old photographs I had with them and try and hold the tears back as I reminisce on the good times I had while it worked with them. The struggles of not being able to see people never struck me as I'd been introverted and socially anxious for many years and despised seeing people a lot. But now I was forced involuntarily to not see them, I desperately struggled to cope with it.

I felt so close to the edge, nothing had worked and I had spent months on end living each day as wake, eat and then sleeping on repeat. I had tried all I could to tie a knot in the frayed ends that split me and my friends apart, just for some glimpse of happiness again but it was to no use.

Cue several weeks later nearing the end of 2020 and I had a popup message from an old friend wanting to reconnect after 4 years of distance, we began to talk and I opened up to her about everything that happened with me, she spoke the same, it awoke in me that I wasn't alone in suffering, others were dealing with losses in friendships and qualifications and goals as I had done. She and I became closer to one another, we spent nights video calling and gaming together, for once I felt wanted again, I felt new hope in life. We shared feeling and counselled one another, we created little goals that we had to do each day and show each other such as making the bed or eating 3 meals a day, little things to get ourselves back on the rails. These little things boosted me, I was always introverted but the hopes that were brought on from her effect on me, I felt a lot more confident, I re-joined the job search and began gaining interviews, some unsuccessful but I kept my head up throughout, I finally faced up to an old fear and began seeking therapy to overcome my depression and anxiety, which has been a massive help to me personally.

I still have many days of no energy wanting to stay in bed days but sprinkled throughout are those sunny days where I feel I could conquer the world. I still cry and I still get annoyed at what has happened to me over the past year, that is in the past I can't change anything. But whatever happens from now I can affect and I won't let myself fall victim to giving up all hope, we have achieved so much and whatever happens, I want to get to see us beat the pandemic and reunite with each other in person.

I may of let the light fade in my mind at one time, but now I only want to see the light of the sun fade over the horizon each night for eternity.

**“I'd been introverted and socially anxious for many years and despised seeing people a lot. But now I was forced involuntarily to not see them, I desperately struggled to cope with it”**

**Miles Wootton**

## “Samaritans. Can I help you?”

“Samaritans. Can I help you?”

How had I got to this point? I have always been an incredibly optimistic and outgoing person but now I found myself having dialled the Samaritans. I had been drinking – that seemed to have become a regular occurrence – but I realised I was now at my lowest point. I was struggling to breathe as the soothing tones of the volunteer reached out to me. And when I say struggling to breathe, I was seriously in fear of my life. I had been crying for what seemed like an hour, but what had begun as a dull ache in my stomach and had moved to become a tight throat had now become all-consuming. I remember wondering if this was what a panic attack felt like but at the grand age of 46, I had never experienced one before so had no point of reference. It was so awful.

“It’s okay, take your time. I’m here when you’re ready to talk.” Her voice was so calming. She offered her name but I can’t really recall it because I felt so overwhelmed by grief and heartache but she sounded so nice.

I opened my mouth but I couldn’t speak. Instead, more wailing came out. I struggled for breath once more.

I felt so pathetic. How had I got here?

The last thing I recall before these overwhelming feelings had overrun me was sitting at the laptop trying to format yet another document for work. It had been super-crazy since this lockdown began and all learning moved online. The struggle to instruct parents through the process as well as trying to do the very basics of the job has been an incredible strain for everyone. Having the laptop and work station set up at the dining table meant there was never truly a break from work. It was too easy to just kid yourself that it would be okay to just do one more thing. Before you knew it, you hadn’t had a break all day, hadn’t eaten properly and it was time to drag yourself to bed before waking up tomorrow and doing it all again. Coupled with the fact that it was winter, all the restaurants and pubs were shut and you can’t go into other people’s houses, it became an incredibly lonely and isolating experience. All in all, not a particularly great mix for one’s mental health.

**“So there I was,  
at the end of yet  
another sixteen  
hour day, and I just  
remember feeling  
light-headed”**

So there I was, at the end of yet another sixteen hour day, and I just remember feeling light-headed. You ever had that feeling on a really hot day when you’ve not eaten or drunk enough water? Your head starts to swim and things don’t quite make sense? Well, the words on the laptop began to swirl and I remember just thinking to myself that it would be good to rest my head on my hands and close my eyes.

It was a weird feeling, one I hadn’t experienced since I was a kid. You know when you have a bit of a fever, you drift off on the sofa, your mum’s voice is in the background, the noises from the tv swirl and mix with your dreams and you can’t quite tell what’s real and what’s your imagination? That’s what it reminded me of. My mind rushed, thoughts twisted as memories and images moved into focus.

The image is seared on my mind: she lay on the bed sobbing, I was standing in the doorway and she turned her tear-stained face towards me and told me she couldn’t go on any more. She said this wasn’t the life she wanted. The conversation had been building for a long time but I didn’t want to acknowledge what she was saying and the timing was awful. My daughter was in the next room and I was getting ready to take her to an orthodontist appointment. I had to go but here was my partner telling me she wanted our relationship to end.

I have no intention of going into personal detail in such a public forum, that would be unfair to her as she has no voice on here or opportunity to put her side of the story but we had reached the point where she was packing her clothes

and possessions into bags just as I was having to leave to take my daughter to her appointment. By the time I returned she had gone. For me, there was no time for closure, no discussion. A four-year relationship was over in about three minutes with no opportunity for conversation. I had my son and daughter with me for another four days and this wasn't a conversation I either wanted on the phone or within their earshot. I was in limbo. She text to say I can collect my things from hers on Friday evening so for four more days I had to struggle on, maintaining a pretence in front of them. Four more nights of no sleep and stress. Given the social restrictions at the time, it was difficult to deal with.

She wanted to part in a good way, on good terms and I wanted to too: I still loved her, I didn't want to pour any more salt into open wounds. I definitely didn't to ruin any potential opportunity for any sort of ongoing friendship for the future. What I didn't think about was the lasting impact on me. We met on the Friday night, I tried everything to remain calm but inside, I was a mess, a total wreck. I should have used this as a chance to talk about all the things that were swimming around my head but I didn't want to provoke any more upset. I was left with things unsaid, things that I would forever have torturing me, especially at night.

A few texts were exchanged during those awful four days. I told her that this wasn't what I wanted and that I loved her. She replied, 'I love you too but it's not enough.'

'It's not enough.' That phrase rang around my head for weeks to come. She was all I wanted and I felt I had poured everything into her over the last few years and here she was saying that it wasn't enough. It felt like she was saying that I wasn't enough. I wasn't what she wanted. It was time for her to move on. Again, I don't want to go into any personal details in a public place but something inside me broke and I didn't know how to go about fixing it.

My confidence and self-belief have been slowly eroded and the weeks that followed the break up were the worst weeks of my life. Sleep went out the window and everything always seems darker with lack of sleep. I would find myself wishing I would catch the coronavirus and just submit to it. Everything had gone so wrong, my friends and family had been distanced, we were in a lockdown and couldn't go anywhere to have a night out, work was unbelievably challenging and I had been left alone, a middle-aged man in a flat in an area I didn't particularly want to live in and totally heartbroken.

**“the weeks that followed the break up were the worst weeks of my life”**

I can only re-iterate, this was never me before this relationship. I was fun, I had a good circle of friends. I was always upbeat and able to see an optimistic future. I still maintain that appearance at work but in every other aspect of my life, I'm changed. I fought hard to re-establish contact with people I had neglected over the last four years. I needed them and I'm very fortunate that some very wonderful people responded. Those closest to me saw the change in me. One mentioned I was struggling with depression, my brother said my mum had mentioned that my spark had gone and another couple of friends (along with the Samaritans) have talked me through some very rough nights.

I felt huge embarrassment along with tremendous shame and guilt. I felt I had lost everything.

I'm not the person I was and I'm not sure I ever will be again. I was left with so much fall out to deal with that I don't know what my future has in store. All I know today is, that thanks to the people at Samaritans, my lovely children, my family and those amazing friends who have shown up when I really needed them to, I do at least have a future. It's not going to be the one I was planning over the last four years, but it will be something.

I do still love her. She is an amazing woman that I will never not want to celebrate; I wanted to build a life with her after all. I still find myself thinking about her. I still miss her and we did have an awful lot in common and got on so well. She is moving on to other things, I need to as well. After a hugely traumatic experience though, that's sometimes easier said than done and I have to have faith that a new future is lying out there waiting for me. It's my choices that will decide what that future looks like.

My first step, trying to own this mess. Trying to speak out and let others know that it's ok to discuss feelings. Don't hide away from your thoughts. Don't shy away from what's affecting you. Speak up. Reach out. Talk.

**Anonymous**

## “I’ve had the perfect excuse to go nowhere and see no-one”

Strangely, in some ways my mental health has improved due to the pandemic. I am in my 40s and have lived with general, and social, anxiety for most of my life. Every day, going to work, or to the supermarket, or getting on a bus, I have to take a deep breath and prepare myself as if I’m about to go into battle. Every conversation fills me with fear and dread, and is something I overanalyse afterwards, and there’s absolutely no chance I’d go to a real social event – birthday parties, leaving dos, family weddings have all been skipped.

In March 2020, when my entire organisation was either furloughed, or asked to work at home, suddenly a huge weight was lifted. I worked at home throughout 2020, before being furloughed in January 2021, and although we were living in a global pandemic, and I was home schooling my children, it was a wonderful relief. No more attempting to make conversation in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil. No more inability to keep up with office ‘banter’ and being the one who never gets the joke. No more dreading the phone ringing in an open plan office. No more girding my loins, putting on a bright smile and getting through the day with gritted teeth.

**“Lifting the anxiety I feel every day, just stepping outside the door, has shown me just how much of a burden it has been”**

Lifting the anxiety I feel every day, just stepping outside the door, has shown me just how much of a burden it has been. I’ve been more productive work-wise when I can sit at home quietly with no anxiety fogging up my brain. I’ve had more time with my children (even if, as teenagers, they probably don’t want time with me!). I took up walking and then running, because suddenly I was able to get through a work day without feeling so drained by anxiety that I had energy left to spare. While I’m grateful that there’s hope in sight for the pandemic, with the vaccine developments, I can feel the anxiety looming again that I’ll have to go back to work. I don’t sleep well now, and I envisage terrible situations looming ahead of me. My energy levels are dropping as work approaches again.

That’s not to say that the pandemic has been all positive of course. Like everyone, I have felt the anxiety of living in a pandemic. I am a single parent, so I have been living with fear that if I get ill – mild or serious – then I have nobody to help out. My children could go to their Dad’s house but there is no one in the world to look after me. As a result, we shut ourselves off completely, for fear of catching Covid. I have been living under the rules from the first lockdown, throughout – I have no bubble, I haven’t seen anyone, and the only place I’ve been is the supermarket, if I couldn’t get a home delivery. This also has done wonders for my social anxiety – I’ve had the perfect excuse to go nowhere and see no-one, but it’s also highlighted just how isolated I am, and the impact this has had on my mental health has been dire.

I have no family within hundreds of miles, and I have no friends. When single parents were allowed to have support bubbles, I looked around and realised that the only people I knew were my parents, my sibling, and my colleagues – who are nice people, but not friends, not going to be the kind of person who rings up and says, ‘I’d love to use my one bubble on you’.

Lockdown has given me a lot of space and time to think about my life and it has not been positive. I am aware now of just how bad my anxiety is – and despite well over 30 years of therapists, counsellors, hypnotherapists, and various drugs, I’ve never found any way through it, and no longer believe there is one. I have realised I have no one in the world outside my family who I matter to. No one to talk to, no one who cares. As spring lightens up the world and the vaccines open it up again, I am left in a very dark place with little hope for a bright future.

**Anonymous**



3 March 2021

## “My sexuality had shifted and the lightbulb went off during lockdown”

Gosh where do I start? As I look back over the last year so much has changed. I have changed in many ways and my life has gone in a completely different direction. I am not the same person I was a year ago.

My life was pretty normal and comfortable. I was working in a professional job with a husband and two children. I lived in a nice house and we frequently went on holiday. We were living a very comfortable existence. I suppose you could say we were leading the perfect life. Life was incredibly busy trying to fit everything it with work, children's activities, exercise and general upkeep of the house.

Covid struck and everything stopped. School, the children's activities, my running club, parkrun. I was now working at home as we all had to adapt. I remember the craziness of people buying toilet paper and bread flour. I didn't buy the toilet paper or bread flour but I did it 2 refurbished laptops for my children for home schooling. I remember walking round the streets and it was so quiet. I remember the quietness and stillness as there were no cars around.

I am a pretty positive person so I continued thinking up new activities to do to ensure. We played board games, took part in exercise, we went for walks and cycle rides. We baked cakes and we did cooking. We were so lucky with the weather that we could do so much outdoors. I took lots of photos. I was also keen to ensure that my children's mental health was as good as it can be.

I missed my friends. I missed Parkrun, I missed my running club but I was determined to make the most of it. My teenagers had overseas trips cancelled and they missed their activities. It is really hard to keep teenagers engaged in sport when it is not organised.

As time went on, I started to go for walks by myself. I started to reflect on my life. My birthday was coming up and I felt empty.

As I went for a walk I was analysing what was going on. The thought suddenly struck me that I felt lonely and I was tired of carrying so much mental load. I organised the house, food, the bills, the kids, the holidays, the medical appointments and school activities. I was tired and I didn't want to do it anymore. I realised that we were not really a couple anymore, we were just parents and people who were a bit like passing ships. Life was so busy, but it had lost meaning. I was living for the next holiday. I was not enjoying the here and now and living in the moment.

There was something else that was bugging me, and I was very confused. I could not understand what was happening to me.

When you find yourself googling “How do you know you are lesbian” and “Late in life lesbian” it is quite a scary and lonely place to be. It is also one of those things you really know the answer as soon as you ask the question. Straight people do not think about these things. I had realised that I had developed feelings for a woman. It was weird. Was it just her or had I shifted? I had been heterosexual for my entire life. I looked back over my life and there was no-one else and no other indications. It was a shift.

**“The thought suddenly struck me that I felt lonely and I was tired of carrying so much mental load”**

My googling led me to online support groups and books. I connected with women all over the world in similar circumstances. I then started counselling with a LGBT+ counsellor. I have never had counselling before and I always thought of it for people with anxiety and depression. Counselling was for other people. It was really good to talk to someone to try and work through the issue. As I talked it through with her it became obvious that it was more than one person. She was just a catalyst for a change in me.

After a little while I built up the courage to tell a couple of friends. I was so scared to say “I am attracted to a woman” for the first time. I kind of had to blurt it out over the phone. Now I appreciate how hard it must be for people who have suffered trauma. One of the things I have discovered during this time is I am more of an introvert than I thought. When under severe stress I tell very few people. I recognised it is still so important to have people to talk to and my closest friends have been amazing. We have been a mutual support group (online) during a difficult time. We have met up when we were allowed.

**“I knew I was about to throw a bomb into my comfortable life but I had no choice”**

As time went on, I realised that I would have to tell my husband. I didn’t really know what to say or where this was going. I didn’t have the answers. All I knew was I felt alone and something had changed. I knew I was about to throw a bomb into my comfortable life but I had no choice. For whatever reason my sexuality had shifted and the lightbulb went off during lockdown number 1 in 2020.

This is not the place to talk about what happened but what I can say is, we are no longer together. We will both starting on a new life. The year of the pandemic is the year that my marriage fell apart and it is the year my identity has shifted.

The way I have managed to cope with this situation is to exercise. I am lucky to live in a beautiful place and I have discovered more of my local area. The running has really been my life saviour and I have been improving on my performance and times. I have been using online apps and virtual fitness sessions especially in the winter. I also downloaded some playlist for my walks. These would be a mixture of tunes depending on my mood. Being outside whether walking, cycling or running always makes me feel better.

During this time, I wrote lots of things down in a journal as it was a way to get my thoughts on paper. I was petrified someone would read it though as this was just a process of working out what was going on. I found it to be a therapeutic process.

I continued to work at home through the pandemic. I am enjoying the flexibility of being able to exercise and different times of the day. Although I miss seeing people in work the benefits of not commuting and the flexibility is much better now. I think it enables me to have a better work life balance, although there is a danger of working too much.

I would have liked to learn some new skills or learn a language but I did not have the mental energy or time to do this. That is ok though as I have learnt not to try and do too many things. I have realised I can go a lot longer without a foreign holiday. There are things I can do at home and it is just as relaxing. I have tried to connect with people from the LGBT+ community which has been nice, but it is also really hard and frustrating as I would like to meet people.

As we come out of the pandemic I am looking forward to meeting new people and embarking on a new chapter in my life. I am going to ensure I continue to enjoy my local area and make the most of the present.

**Anonymous**

6 March 2021

## “My life in a nursing home in 2020”

Christmas is over, usual sad/happy affair  
2020 has started – and what a year!  
Resolutions made to be forgotten later  
Food, good, varied: for us they cater.  
Then comes covid, so inconsiderate, unfair  
No more visitors, loneliness to bear

My husband, partner, friend, tho often no there,  
With words of comfort responds to my pain, my tear  
Other residents, companions that matter  
Pop by with a smile or a wave and a natter  
Nurses, carers and staff give care night and day  
Largely good, but they are human, hey hey

Varied activities help time pass by  
Keeping minds and fingers busy and spry  
Admiring our efforts gives us pleasure  
And kind words give memories to treasure  
The virus keeps visitors away as such  
But phone calls allowed, stop it from hurting too much

Money and no shopping doesn't worry us  
Others do the worrying; so why make a fuss?  
We have photos, important to keep us aware  
Of those far away, we smile at the memories and suppress the care  
Yeah, we are into December, the yearly nearly done  
So welcome the vaccine. Have a good 2021

**“The virus keeps  
visitors away as such  
But phone calls  
allowed, stop it from  
hurting too much”**

Anonymous

# “Breaking point occurred and a stark choice had to be made between me and my loved one or my job”

I suppose in some ways I have been a bit luckier than some as being a fairly solitary person to start with, being physically cut off from certain things was not really too much of an issue.

However, what did clearly become an issue was trying to juggle the worsening health of a loved one and working from home.

I managed both with a degree of success for 8 months and then the small cracks in my psyche became full breaks. I had recognised some of the early signs and tried to deal with them but the pandemic had made accessing the sorts of services needed much harder.

**“I managed both with a degree of success for 8 months and then the small cracks in my psyche became full breaks”**

Breaking point occurred and a stark choice had to be made between me and my loved one or my job. After much soul searching and advice, I chose me and my loved one.

Now, I realise that in the middle of a pandemic is not the best time to be out of work (there is not really a best time) but it was not the best time to have a full on breakdown either (there is NEVER a good time to have one of those). Something had to give and it was not going to be me, or by proxy my loved one.

I handed my notice in and my reasons for going were accepted and understood. I knew as soon as I did it that I had made the right choice. I knew that though there would be stress and strain finding work, that it would pale in comparison to what juggling a pandemic and all the uncertainty, stress and adapting that came with, catering for the needs both emotional and physical of my loved one, and catering for my own needs.

This pandemic has certainly been one hell of a learning curve and has served to remind me of what really is important and not just what society projects to be important.

## “My depression is deep. But my mask is held on with strong glue”

So, we started 2020 with the massive issue that is Brexit. This affected us all as at points during the year we were left thinking what exactly will be the changes - for me, businesses not being able to plan their training budget had a direct effect. As I am a Mental Health Trainer.

Then Covid hit, and businesses and communities were given an immediate knock, a heavy one. The Government spent more time talking about how “British common sense” was going to get us through quicker than any other country in the world. But that did not turn out to be quite so true. So training took a back seat as businesses struggled to re-arrange their business to be Covid-safe.

And then we started seeing the images of the NHS people that had lost their lives trying to save our lives. And those faces were hugely disproportionality black. Everybody had to acknowledge this truth, but the investigations into why this was happening were laughable. First the Government said that racism was not the cause. Then it said there were many factors involved, and that filibustering continues to this day. And so we were damaged, again. All black people were. Our mental health took a battering. And still I had next to no work as a Mental Health Trainer.

**“we were damaged, again. All black people were. Our mental health took a battering”**

And then came the police murder of Breonna Taylor, and Daniel Prude, and George Floyd. And black people everywhere were suffering a trauma as they saw their own sons, brothers, husbands, nephews laying on the floor, saying ‘I can’t breathe’ as a murderer in a uniform could take away his life. And then came the police killing of Rayshard Brooks, and we all felt completely helpless. We attended Black Lives Matter protests - even though we were criticised for doing so. I was not able to convince my white friends that I had to go, even during Covid, and so friendships were lost, never to return. We knew society would refuse to change, unless it was forced to do so. We heard all the nice sounding statements from white-majority society leaders. There was some sort of glimmer of hope that at least we were actually doing something about racism, and some white allies were there with us.

For a while, organisations were asking me to help them with getting their statements out there, and develop an action plan to help them get better. But they never paid me for it. If I had been a white diversity consultant they would have asked me how much I needed to perform this work. But because I’m black I’m seen as an expendable member of their organisation, useful for now, to help them now, but never to be seriously considered as a future leader of their organisation. And I did help for free, because I’m a generous person. To fund the lack of training courses being requested by everything happening in Covid, I started doing gardening and other odd jobs. Eventually I started working in a private care home. A location where verbal threats and actual assault is a daily experience. And where the staff were 80% black, but all the residents were white. The residents were happy to play into this racial imbalance by just dropping things on the floor for staff to have to keep bending down and picking up. But their actions are excused as being completely down to their mental health issues. So - keep bending down to your knee, Mike, even at work.

Then some organisations started to realise that they should help out their black staff, a bit. So they developed some programmes which on the surface looked good. Except if you took advantage of these, and when invited to comment

told the organisers what you really felt, you were asked to resign from the programme. With statements such as ‘we have a robust quality control of the way our participants should behave – your behaviour was considered unsupporting to what the instructor was trying to achieve’. So I was dismissed from some of these programmes, and replaced by more “malleable” people in others. All at the direction, of course, of white programme managers (who most certainly would have had some sort of unconscious bias training).

And so how did the year end and 2021 start? Well, for me, mental health training never picked up. Lockdowns put paid to that. The Government has yet to determine the factors that cause disproportionate deaths of people due to their ethnicity. Organisations that remain white-led and white-majority are still struggling to make any headway in diversity, finding out that any sort of change will be resisted by those currently staffing them.

And the future? Well I keep working hard at odd jobs, part-time jobs, and the very occasional mental health training opportunity to pay the bills. It is one day at a time. But I cannot tell you how my mental health is, because I’m a trainer in the area and have to keep that under wraps or I’ll lose even that as an income stream.

I’ll stop now, as it is exhausting having to relive these things. Even though I am reminded of them every, single, day. And my depression is deep. But my mask is held on with strong glue.

Because I cannot let my children see me damaged or broken, as they have all this to go through one day by themselves.

**Mike T**

## “On paper I should have had the worst lockdown ever”

In a way, the pandemic has so badly affected my mental health that it's been a good thing.

I'm someone who lives with autoimmune diseases, musculoskeletal problems as well as depression and anxiety. On paper I should have had the worst lockdown ever. And, I have. Sort of. I was living with a friend and really enjoying life. She however, works in a school and so it wasn't viable for me to remain there. On top of that my mum was at my Aunt's and so my brother who has many other issues including being a crack addict was going to be on his own. He pretty much begged me to come home. So I did. There were many days which lead into weeks where he was clean and sober. But then the addiction and yearning would hit so hard that he would go off and I was left alone, in the middle of a pandemic. I didn't know who he was with, were they safe, was he going to bring back Covid? On top of that a friend of his split up with his long term girlfriend 20 years and she came out as gay. He had no where to go so came to stay with us. The anxiety was real. Then one of my closest friends was sectioned and that was so tough.

I just kept going, adapting, ignoring, getting through. None of it was ok. It was stressful, horrific and at times so much that I had to get in my car and drive and park somewhere quiet on my own and cry. I kept it all quiet from my mum and only told one or two friends how bad it got. But I got through. We were able to go out again for a bit and then the lockdowns came back. The thought of going into another lockdown filled me with dread and anxiety. I couldn't breath, couldn't sleep, felt ill all the time. Tearful and feeling isolated, worthless and unimportant. It is so much easier to forget about yourself and keep the peace. Shut up and keep going but at what cost?

It has affected me deeply. I don't want to go out anymore. I don't even really want to go to the shops. I just want to stay at home. But, it has made me look to the future because I don't want to live like this. I am now exploring the idea of moving far away. Near to my wider family who are supportive. It feels scary and I don't know it's the best thing, but it's a decision I'm more able to make because of the serious impact the lockdown has had on my mental health. I feel like I've come full circle but still need to take that final step. I know now I want to make good and healthy decisions for myself, meaningful decisions, something I've never felt able to do or never even occurred to me to do before. Don't get me wrong, I've not done this on my own. My doctor has been amazing, I've been prescribed medication which has been amazing, offered counselling and am actually seeing a psychologist through the NHS.

I don't know how deep the long term affects are on my mental health but I do know that I've learned that it's ok to be someone who wants things for herself. It's ok and not selfish to make them happen. I don't have to Martyr myself and I think living with mental Health issues for 30 years whilst having unreasonable expectations put on me by myself and my family is no way to live. Maybe the positive is that the horror of the impact lockdown has had on my mental health is that it has helped to solidify in my mind what I absolutely do not want to tolerate anymore. And what I deserve and want for myself. Day to day peace. A home which is a sanctuary. Choice and control over decisions I make which are for my positive benefit. I'm grateful that I've had this time to learn more about myself. Who I am and how I cope. Who I want to be and how I want to live. That I don't have to have 'things' to be happy but instead, have had some semblance of autonomy which therefore means I take responsibility in a different way. And of course fluoxetine helps!

Going through lockdown was awful but if it is the stepping stone to a healthier and happier life I'll take the hit. Maybe then I'll be more equipped to manage my mental health issues.

**“Going through lockdown was awful but if it is the stepping stone to a healthier and happier life I'll take the hit”**

**Anonymous**

## “Missing Parkrun”

I am a big fan of parkrun.

I started running parkrun three years ago and initially I just wasn't very good at it. It's five kilometres and although I had put in some solo practice before my first attempt, it still felt a very long way to run.

Week by week I gradually improved until I could run the distance without stopping. And then I became more competitive with myself, wanting to beat my personal best time each week. I could say that lockdown is the reason I am two years on from my last personal best, but I am doubtful that I will beat it ever again as both age and commitment are against me.

In December 2019 I was boosted by the difference having another birthday made to my age adjusted ranking and every Saturday morning, I felt it was worth putting on my shorts and heading to the promenade park to run along the estuary.

Each week's parkrun had its own characteristics. Some weeks we felt a refreshing breeze, and the tide was out, other weeks the water was high, and a cold wind blew. Whether the day was icy, mild or hot I would always end up exhausted, but with a sense of achievement. The Saturday morning run was my main exercise for the week and my hobby. It also provided some of the framework for looking after my mental health.

**“I remember getting up very early one Saturday and running the parkrun course, eerily alone, feeling on edge about being more than 3 miles from home”**

When the first lockdown kept us all at home, except for exercise, I remember getting up very early one Saturday and running the parkrun course, eerily alone, feeling on edge about being more than 3 miles from home, which probably was an offence.

In the Summer of last year I could run with one other person, and then the second lockdown meant that wasn't allowed either and I had to find the motivation to keep going, running by myself, holding on to the hope that it might not be long before parkrun friends would be able to run together again.

There is a motivating familiarity to the process of a parkrun, hearing the repetition of instructions at the start of the run, the countdown to go, and the encouragement from the marshals as we round the corner for the second time, up the hill for the last time, and then finally cross the line to collect our finish token and head to the pavilion for a well-earned drink.

I miss it so much. Parkrun was my self-care routine for looking after my physical and mental health. It has been the inspiration for the gifts bought for me by family and friends. Part of my identity is the number of parkruns that I have completed, which has stood frozen at 97. For over a year I've waited to complete my 100 parkruns. I've done another 40 or so unofficial 5ks, but they don't count towards the t-shirt.

I wouldn't say I actually enjoy parkrun. I don't look forward to the effort and the pain, but there is something about getting to the other side of that discomfort which helps me feel good. I like the satisfaction of clocking up another run, but there's also something beneficial about it being a shared experience that somehow we just have to get through. We are all running alongside others, and whether we have a better or worse experience on a particular day, we are all simply trying to do the distance, just grinding it out until we get to the end.

Last year and the coming months seem like a long and arduous run, battling the numerous challenges the pandemic has presented to us. I look around and I see so many examples where we are supporting one another. I believe that running this course together is itself a source of mental strength for me, and I hope it is for you too.

**Jan Hutchinson**



25 March 2021

## “My Bedroom Walls”

I found myself spending each day the same, we all joked about March being 3 months long so I wrote a poem about how my intrusive and darkest thoughts got so overwhelming from being isolated in my house and my bedroom. And this is that poem:

I wake up and sit on my bed,  
spend my day staring at my bedroom walls.  
Talking to the person in my head,  
and letting my textbooks fall.

Onto the floor, where I lay on my back,  
Singing to the glowing stars on my ceiling.  
It's always the same soundtrack,  
playing in the back. I can't change the CD.  
I guess it's my way of dealing  
with having to spend all day with me.

Nothing makes me smile anymore  
and my whole world sits within this box.  
I don't know what I'm waking up for,  
My bedroom door isn't even locked.

But I'm not leaving this room  
and the thoughts aren't leaving soon.  
I stay home and they're stuck within me.

Head in my HANDS  
I don't recognize my FACE  
My mind is dying in this SPACE

As I wake up again under those stars,  
I lie to my therapist when he calls.  
I tell him about the ways  
I've been “coping”  
during this lockdown.

And next week I won't answer the phone.  
My broken heart will have opened my door.  
My resting head will roll along the floor.  
My spirit won't be locked up anymore.  
Having to stare  
At my bedroom walls.

**“I lie to my therapist when  
he calls.  
I tell him about the ways  
I've been “coping”  
during this lockdown”**

**Louise Robinson**

# “My whole life cancelled when I’d just started enjoying it”

When the lockdown started in March 2020, I was a final year languages student in Manchester. I also have a history of anorexia nervosa and I was still in active recovery at this point. I kept a diary throughout the pandemic, but I have selected a few days from the beginning of the pandemic to share how I felt at the time.

## March 16, 2020

It’s all real today. The government has announced that we shouldn’t go to bars, clubs, restaurants. University is closing and we’ve had our first case here in Fallowfield, Manchester. I’m so unsure what will happen over the next few months, but I just want to go back home. I can’t wait for it to all be clearer.

## March 17, 2020

Today was my last day of final year. I said goodbye to my friends, who I have no idea when I’ll next see, and they closed the university library. It wasn’t what I’d imagined, no pub crawls or parties or exams. It was just a normal day and now we’re going back home – what an anti-climax! It’s also St Paddy’s – what a weird combo – so we made a cake and drank at home to a coronavirus playlist.

## March 18, 2020

The supermarkets are scary. There’s no food there... It’s just empty aisles where things used to be. I’m scared about this, as if we don’t have food, we might have to restrict a bit and I can’t let the food-side of this affect my eating disorder. I have to keep fighting and eating enough. This whole situation is a huge potential trigger, but I am strong enough to overcome it. This is what I have been practising so hard for, to deal with uncertainty, to be okay regardless of the situation.

## March 23, 2020

Tonight, Boris announced that we’re in lockdown. We’re not allowed to leave our houses except to exercise once per day. It was terrifying.

## March 29, 2020

There is so much beauty in the little things – or are these the big things – the blue skies, running down a hill, staying in and dancing to your favourite songs. These are the things I will hold on to when everyone tells me I should be scared, that I should be worried and anxious. Yes, everything is changing, but the beauty is still in the world. The world isn’t over, and I won’t let this stop me being happy when I can.

## March 30, 2020

Everything just seemed to get on top of me today. The injustice of having my whole life cancelled when I’d just started enjoying it, that I’ll never be able to do final year again or graduate “properly”. With the added noise of my eating disorder, it just felt like too much. But I don’t think its bad to acknowledge this. It isn’t always easy and I am allowed to be upset.

“Today was my last day of final year. I said goodbye to my friends, who I have no idea when I’ll next see”

**April 1, 2020**

I can hear my eating disorder saying that I'll gain weight because most of the day we're just at home, but I have to remember what I give up if I give in. It's not a choice between restriction and normal, if I pick restriction, I lose everything with it: my brain, the relationships I've built, my health, my happiness, being an honest person – being me. So really, it's not a choice.

I have used the extra time in lockdown to put more effort into recovery from my eating disorder. A year on, I have recovered so fully that I barely recognise the thoughts I had at this time. I no longer have to reason with myself over why I should eat or shouldn't exercise; I am no longer scared of weight gain and I have addressed many of the issues that activated my eating disorder.

I suffered from an eating disorder for over six years, and although at times I have felt frustrated that I have recovered into a world where I can't make up for the time that I lost to a half-life with an eating disorder, I can't wait to enjoy the world post-lockdown without having to share my life with it.

**Olivia Burney**

# “I am beginning to forget who I was”

I live with Fibromyalgia and Chronic High-Functioning Depression, the pandemic made the management of both, conditions tough, especially due to my single-parent status and schooling shifting to homes (still is) in India. 2020 began as a usual year for me, no drumrolls, no fanfare. The usual lonely New year, the usual academic year-end for the young one, and a brief family trip to Nainital thrown in February to get away from the monotony.

**“We returned and all hell broke loose in Delhi with the Delhi riots and then in a few weeks, Corona hit the scene”**

We returned and all hell broke loose in Delhi with the Delhi riots and then in a few weeks, Corona hit the scene. By mid-March, there were whispers of the government deciding something big- it came on March 23rd, one day long Janta Curfew and then....a word I had heard but never imagined could be so heavy LOCKDOWN. The other day I was reminiscing the life that changed on that fateful morning.

I haven't written much in the last year, yes I did attend webinars and webinars and upgrade all my skills, make myself useful to whatever social work or activism was possible online, and yes SURVIVE along with writing one book and translating THREE!

I don't know any longer what is normal, the one that was or this new normal? Will life be ever the same? This has certainly been a long road through mental health struggle and resilience, logistic difficulties and survival.

I wonder.

I am beginning to forget who I was.

## “December. An intruder calls.”

‘The sun, softly adrift between the creamy puffs of a nearby cloud, ends her day shift and is welcomed by the ever-twinkling, silver hue of the nighttime moon.’

That detailed description of what is, quite simply, just another sunset comes to mind more often than you might think. As a writer, I am blessed with the ability to find the truly wonderful in what may, at least at first, appear to be nothing worth noticing. This gift is inclusive of all things – objects, animals or even people – particularly people, in fact, as they generally need help in order to see truly wonderful things, especially if that wonderful thing is, well, them. You might be asking how this has anything to do with the pandemic, but I can assure you it has been, and continues to be, crucial to my emotional and mental survival thus far.

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For many of us, myself included, hope was the chosen response when COVID-19 first reared its ugly head. We spent time in each other’s company, whether we enjoyed it or otherwise, and we laughed at the idea of a pandemic until it was pushed forcefully from our homes, an unwelcome intruder.

Until March arrived.

Rather, March had broken through our once-stable door, rebellious, the virus its weapon of choice and us, its long-time victim... not that we could’ve known. Could we? We still held onto hope, stuck ourselves to it like bees to honey, confident that it would shield us from the truth of the situation, and yet it was not nearly strong enough to overwhelm the intruder.

This threat resembled a chameleon in many ways. It sought out hosts upon which to feed, weaving between unsuspecting individuals, appearing suddenly and sporadically while occasionally preferring to remain anonymous – invisible, camouflaged – as was eventually the case with my partner. For now, comfortable in this little Lancashire town, we were innocent in our self-assurance that we wouldn’t run into the intruder.

#lockdownlife -

Admittedly, I’m not particularly keen on using hashtags but I can appreciate their use in drawing attention to whichever topic it may refer. For weeks, months, this hashtag became ever the more popular among the hundreds of thousands already floating around the chasm that is social media. With it came an abundance of outdoor photographs, following a surge in exercise as a result of our united sense of unending boredom, and more importantly, a newfound respect for the little things in life – the little, truly wonderful things, exemplified in the sunset I described above.

Speaking as a collective, we were grateful that our first lockdown would be lightened by the warm, ever-the-more sunny days of spring and summer. Once again we were met with hope, but she instead presented herself in the blue of the sky, in the emerald stems of freshly mown grass and in the beautiful, gentle bleeps of new-born lambs in the fields that encompassed our home. We were grateful for those little things and we welcomed them with a sigh of relief, as though they had once been lost to us but had promptly returned.

**“March had broken through our once-stable door, rebellious, the virus its weapon of choice and us, its long-time victim”**

Much as the florist's flowers are fed by her hand, so must our happiness be fed by our care. If we choose to put aside our happiness, we put aside the initial care that we so require in order to bring about that happiness again. As we hastened quickly towards winter, the happiness we had grown accustomed to was indeed put aside, through no human fault, but by the consequence of our falling quickly into colder months. The brisk embrace of autumn seeped through the heat we had known, breaking open the hope-shaped shell that we had hidden so comfortably hidden within.

December. An intruder calls.

To my family and I, the intruder insisted on a formal introduction, leaving little room for doubt of its presence. For two weeks, it worked through the anatomical labyrinth of our bodies, exploiting weaknesses that could be found in my asthma, or in my parents' age. Then, no faster than it had caught us in its infectious gaze, it made an abrupt exit, taking with it our sense of taste and smell in exchange for an unfathomable feeling of weighted exhaustion.

To our initial surprise, in the days that followed, we began to regain our stolen senses, finding our solace in copious amounts of Christmas food and appreciative that we could once more taste the velvet texture left behind by chocolate.

**“To my family and I,  
the intruder insisted on  
a formal introduction,  
leaving little room for  
doubt of its presence”**

Snow didn't fall for us in December, but would instead trail behind in flurries that delicately enrobed the darker days of January and February. These days, held together by the seemingly permanent frost that halted our most enjoyable outdoor experiences, were spent in finding hope within the confines of the home.

The little things were different but shared one, unmistakable purpose.

I saw it in yesterday's frozen footprints, left by partner as he had walked to his car.

I heard it in the whistling robin, his red chest puffed, proud of his personal symphony.

I smelled it in the bubbling, rich aroma of beef stew, smiling at its unmistakable British-ness.

I tasted it in the snowflake I caught on my tongue, its pointed sides disintegrating as it melted away into water.

And I touched it in the calming hug, excited cuddle and gentle cheek-kiss of my mother, father, brother and partner.

These little things are my purpose, my unmistakable and truly wonderful purpose.

They are the beautiful little things we experience every day, inside or outside, alone or with company.

There is beauty in every little thing – one need only look closely enough to see it.

**Jessica S. Winchester**

30 March 2021

# “Navigating a sea of uncertainty”

Much like the pandemic itself my emotional and mental wellbeing have been navigating a sea of uncertainty. Waves of highs and lows occasionally settling in a stable stillness much like a lake being shaped by its environment.

**Carlina Whitmore**

## “It feels scary to think I won’t have the excuse of Covid to hide behind”

I’m glad that we had no idea, at the start, just how long this thing would play out for. When the first lockdown was announced, over a year ago now, I was terrified. Not by the virus, but by how on earth I would cope with just myself for company as I worked full time from home. My mental health was shaky enough at the best of times following a relapse the year before, but working in an office or with a friend made things bearable, providing a distraction from the monotonous barrage of thoughts.

I finished NHS therapy as lockdown began, completing my sessions over Teams before being chucked back into this bizarre new world to stand, shakily, ‘on my own two feet’.

That lockdown was surreal, unnerving and at times lonely, but I was fortunate to be shielded from the horrors of the frontline, or the death of loved ones. We lived in a leafy part of south-east London, with ready access to green space. We snapped polaroids of stunning blossom trees outside our church, and wondered how long it would be until we’d get to step inside again.

It seemed cruelly unfair to be enjoying weekly Zoom quizzes with our friends, or learning to fly kites on the heath, while others fought in our hospitals and lost their parents. Some of us have been making quarantinis and enjoying birdsong whilst others buried multiple family members.

And in the midst of all of this, we were met with the news that we would be moving. Upping sticks to the Midlands, somewhat nearer to family but a complete wrench from the London life which had been the backdrop to my twenties. It felt unreal, and almost cruel, that we were having to say goodbyes to people who’d been a massive part of our lives over Zoom. We left Greenwich in July and I haven’t been back since. It’s suspended in polaroids of evening summer sunshine, ‘bubble’ picnics, and goodbyes at a two-metre distance.

Perhaps, like most other things in my life, Covid has played second-fiddle to more immediate concerns – like living with a mental illness. From the outset, I was less immediately concerned about this very real, very present virus, and more consumed by the just-as-real (but hypothetical) terrors dreamt up by my own mind. Maybe there just wasn’t enough space in there to encompass any more fear.

The impact of restrictions, however, were all too real. Working solo was more bearable than anticipated, but we were not immune from the isolation of Covid, especially once we’d moved away from the London support network which had been cultivated over so many years. We found a new church, but we weren’t allowed to talk to anyone, so we left as disconnected as we had arrived. The November lockdown had little impact on our lives: it’s not like we’d socialised with anyone since we moved! I forced myself into the small garden of our new place, planting bulbs in October and waiting for something to grow.

**“I was less immediately concerned about this very real, very present virus, and more consumed by the just-as-real (but hypothetical) terrors dreamt up by my own mind”**



A year on from lockdown, I find myself in a different city, too many miles away from family and friends. We've begun to make tentative connections, but eight months after moving we can't yet call anyone 'friends'. I emailed colleagues to say how bizarre it felt to not have seen them in person for over a year. "Any of you could have grown a third leg or three inches taller," I lamented, "and I'd be none the wiser".

In many ways, the pandemic has enabled me to avoid situations which turbo-charge my anxiety; I finally had a legitimate excuse for keeping my distance in social situations. In some ways Covid has kept me 'comfortable', but I know that true recovery will only be achieved by embracing my discomfort. Yet it still feels scary to think I won't have the excuse of Covid to hide behind.

Despite this, everything looks more hopeful as spring erupts around us. My daffodils and crocuses bloomed defiantly, without warning and impervious to how I might be feeling on any given day. Clutching onto that hope, I pray that 2021 might bring not only a collective recovery from Covid, but another step towards a life without fear.

**Thea Joshi**

## A Year in Our Lives: An anthology

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