

COMING OUT OF COVID – FOCUS ON PEOPLE

As with previous pandemics from Ancient Greece to 1918 in 2020/21 as humans we are responding in many of the same ways as our forebears – shock, denial, fear of consequences and uncertainty, confusion, community and business dysfunction, false hopes, creating disillusionment and sometimes despair. An emotional rollercoaster of epic proportions.

What we are experiencing is having deep and long lasting impacts even if we have not experienced personal illness or loss. Despite all the societal, technological and other differences between now and 1918 or even Ancient Greece we are all still human beings with similar hopes and fears about ourselves, family, friends and society.

Our brains have now been subject to cognitive overload for nearly a year. We can cope with change, but when there are multiple changes each of which have significant impact on the key elements of the structure of our lives and these are then all combined with long term uncertainty, in particular no end in sight, after a while we have difficulty coping.

Whilst at a surface level most people say they are “fine” there is now evidence from around the world that many people are showing some signs of burnout. Self assessments of peoples own mental state as “poor” has increased 3 fold since Covid started. There is evidence of significant damage to our mental and physical health, even if we haven’t been ill. Whilst Covid has impacted men more than women in terms of the physical illness and death rates the reverse appears to be the case with stress and its impact.

Study after study globally has shown that women are more worried about Covid. One US study showed 57% of men were worried about Covid but 77% of women. The significant impact of Covid on families and social relationships which women tend, as a group, to prioritise more highly than men is seen as a primary driver. Linked to this is the worry about the closure of schools which means one parent has to stay at home.

In a broader sense the responses we have seen over the pandemic replicate well documented phases which are experienced by those dealing with or experiencing disasters.

Heroic Response – at the start of Covid the vast majority faced the challenge head on, stepped up, worked together and put their lives on hold to sprint successfully to the end of Covid which we expected to be in just a few months. Things came together unexpectedly well; remote working wasn’t a disaster and even uncooperative colleagues were cooperative. Organisations stripped out cumbersome bureaucracy to get things done fast. Whilst most engaged and stepped up a few took the “this isn’t happening” denial approach to stressful change which continued as things got worse leading to problems not only for themselves but others around them.

Digging in for Long haul – The problem was the sprint turned into a marathon as it became clear that Covid was not going to be gone in 2 -3 months as cases continued to rise. This realisation, that there was no clear end to the stress and the lockdown continuations started to seriously impact day to day life, relationships and work. By now having had nearly 4 months stress building social isolation, growing personal proximity to illness and death, core day to day activities and beliefs which framed our lives shattered or put on hold took their

toll. All of which led to real uncertainty about our own futures in almost every facet of our lives. That multiple stress impact created a vicious circle which magnified the effect of each individual component. But at least there was some hope as cases seemed to be in decline.

Hopes dashed – then the 2nd waves hit. The realisation that the hope of escape had been replaced with the likelihood of it getting even worse and for longer was a point at which the rollercoaster was starting its plunge to a point lower than many hadn't anticipated even in their worst fears. More and more people either had personally suffered from Covid or lost a family member and worse was to come. For those in work it was bad enough for others out of work or self employed this caused stress levels to soar with significant physical impacts. Many moved to grief, despair, hopelessness with increases in drug use, abuse and suicide. The impact on health systems with Covid blocking treatment for other health issues from cancer to emergencies compounded people stress further. There is no question long term stress is literally a killer and Covid had been with us for over 6 months by then.

Vaccine vision – then vaccine hope arrived which seemed to herald normality returning quickly. But this only turned out to be a faint light at the end of an even darker tunnel, the timeline for vaccine distribution being so distant, indeterminate with cases and deaths continuing to rise. This led the 3rd wave of lockdowns in many places with yet a further ramping up of uncertainty and increased stress.

Living on the edge – Now we are watching the variant vs vaccination race, hoping the vaccines will beat the variant spread. Hope but fears underneath yet again, more uncertainty and stress as we don't know if this is going to turn into the true moment of final escape or we will have to endure something worse still before that escape eventually happens.

What does this tell us ? Probably that our own responses we might not have admitted to anyone out of fear of seeming "not up to it" were natural, predictable and consistent with the same perspectives and feelings in many others. That should reassure us that we aren't alone in our personal rollercoaster "downs" but equally our "ups" are real and positive hopes, not self deluding fiction.

Going back to looking at how people respond to disasters, illness, injury or other life changing events this may give us insight to the way forwards. Having been an Army Officer and a board advisor to a charity helping servicemen injured in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere who had to leave the services as a result of those injuries I am fully aware of the shattering impact not only physically but mentally that occurs. Whilst Covid will not have had such a traumatic impact for most people the responses from those experiencing truly lifechanging events and how they potentially move on can help us thinking about how we move on from Covid. For those who have sadly had such life changing experiences during Covid they can be of some help as well.

The responses of these servicemen generally fell into 3 groups :

1. **Looking backwards** – trying to move back to or live in a reflection of a lost past, denial of what had happened, even though the evidence that it had happened was

obvious and practical. This denial of reality had the predictable impact, causing people to seek some route out of the fundamental contradiction through alcohol, drugs or worse.

Living in the now – no future, no past – caught in a groundhog day which never seems to move forward. Literally living day trying to forget the past but fearful of an uncertain future, often letting events take control rather than even trying to take control of future events which were within their control.

2. **Leap of faith** – starting anew based on the reality of the present and then creating a vision of a personal future which aligned to their new capabilities and wishes. It was about the acceptance of growth into a new self, challenging their own beliefs about who they are now not just who they were, a belief that the old and new can combine successfully.

Whats next for us ? We need to start to plan our own post Covid world based on our experiences, changed priorities and perspectives of how best we will flourish in the new world. Whilst Covid continues to rage many people are perhaps understandably still in the “Living day to day” mindset. But the evidence clearly shows those who have the “Leap of Faith” mindset are significantly more likely to move forwards successfully with a vision for their future. Perhaps it’s time for each of us to start to plan our Leap of Faith ? Make no mistake there is no going back.

Linked to this there are other things we can all do which have been seen to help people move through Covid which may help you and others and create a foundation to move forwards. Maybe these 4 are worth focusing on :

1. **Its OK to not be OK sometimes** – others have, and will feel the same, so it’s ok to feel like this. It’s not an admission of weakness, it’s good to talk about it and discover everyone around you has probably been there as well.
2. **Compassion** - When you are on your rollercoaster up then support those going down. Surviving tough times is often easier thinking “We not Me” and sharing the positive or helping others find their positive.
3. **Cherish every positive moment** you see or feel – no matter how small. If it helps write them down, build a reservoir of positive ups for when your rollercoaster heads down.
4. **Realism with optimism** – look for the light at the end of the tunnel to sustain you but accept that the tunnel could be longer than it first appears but no matter what happens you will get to that light in the end.

But these are positive behaviours at anytime not just during a pandemic !

Hopefully this has given you some insight into your own journey so far, a better understanding of how other people are thinking and feeling and give you some ideas with which to move forwards successfully through the rest of Covid into the new world.

Good luck.