

WHAT IS THE STORY WE'RE TELLING OURSELVES AS WE STEP BACK INTO OPEN LIVING?

What is the story we are telling ourselves as we leave lockdown? Is it the story of how we were initially rocked by the enormity of death and suffering this pandemic brought to every corner of the world but gradually adapted in creative and innovative ways. Is it a story of terrible things that happen to us or a story of how life has a way of continually renewing itself? It is the story about helplessness in the face of catastrophe or a wakeup call to how our everyday actions can unintentionally harm each other or save each other's lives. Is this pandemic an aberration or a warning light, a glimpse into our collective future, where the truth of our interdependence - on each other and on this earth - will come home with even more devastating force?

In the July edition of *The Atlantic**, there is a report on the results of a review commissioned by the *Lancet*, on the impact of this pandemic on our mental health. The study was prompted by a desire to find out whether the coronavirus pandemic triggered a worldwide mental health crisis - a psychological epidemic - as most researchers and clinicians believed it would. After all, the pandemic generated many conditions that we know lead to psychological distress; sudden, widespread disruptions to people's livelihoods and social connections; millions bereaved; the most vulnerable subjected to prolonged hardship. A global collapse in well-being had seemed inevitable. But much to the surprise of the authors, that wasn't what they found to be the case.

The power of this study was that it was based on 1,000 published research surveys, across 100 different countries, involving hundreds of thousands of people. The specific concern of the authors was the impact of this pandemic on levels of anxiety, depression & suicide in the general population, and also what effect had the pandemic had on general levels of life satisfaction. They employed two ways of gathering data: they compared documented measures of these factors in comparable groups of people before and during the pandemic, and they looked at studies that tracked the same individuals over time and monitored changes in their mood and satisfaction levels.

Early in the Pandemic the authors found evidence of a "dramatic climb" in the levels of anxiety, depression and broader psychological distress across the world. In both US and Norway, for example, depression rose threefold in Mar-April 2020, compared to averages collected in previous years. In a study of 50,000 people in the UK, 27% showed clinical significant levels of distress early in the pandemic, compared to 19%. Where one in every

nine young people had been known to struggle with mental health issues on any given day prior to the pandemic, this figure climbed to one in every six young people

But by summer 2020, something had happened: average levels of depression, anxiety and psychological distress began to fall. In many studies, overall distress had returned to near pre-pandemic levels.

The task force wondered if their data were biased being based disproportionately on wealthy countries, so they expanded the number of countries being looked at. The same pattern was evident. They then considered that even if the pandemic didn't produce intense, long-term distress, surely it reduced people's overall satisfaction with life. They recruited the Gallup Poll organisation to carry out a survey across a wide range of countries asking people to evaluate their life on a 0-10 scale (zero being the worst possible life they could imagine and 10 being the best). This organisation had been gathering data for many years preceding the pandemic which they could then compare with data gathered in mid to late 2020. What they found was not what they'd expected:

"Looking at the world as a whole, we saw no trace of a decline in life satisfaction: people in 2020 rated their lives at 5.75 on average, identical to previous years".

The authors also considered whether the surveys they were evaluating weren't reaching those who were struggling the most. If you weren't feeling your best it was quite likely the person contacted may not have cooperated in any survey. So they looked objectively at the reported suicide rate in April-July 2020 to previous years, drawing on government stats in 21 countries. No detectible increase on suicide was found. In fact, in some countries, including the US, the suicide rate declined slightly.

The authors concluded overall that "People are more resilient than they themselves realise." This is not a new finding. It's been consistently a truth that psychological studies conclude.

"We imagine that negative life events - losing a job or a romantic partner - will be devastating for months or years. When people actually experience these losses, their misery tends to fade faster than they imagined it would."

The researchers took pain to emphasise that these findings were in no way to be seen to minimise the pain and distress of people who were deeply impacted by Covid-19.

"...these broad trends and averages shouldn't erase the real struggles - immense pain, overwhelming loss, financial hardships- that so many people have faced over the past 17 months... Like so many aspects of the pandemic, the coronavirus's mental health toll was not distributed evenly... Lasting mental health challenges disproportionately affected people who were facing financial issues, individuals who got sick with Covid-19, and those who had been struggling with physical and mental health difficulties prior to the pandemic."

What can we take from this study? Is there some useful lesson we can take from it as our lives 'open up'? What have the past 17 months shown us about what helps us survive? What would we individually and collectively do differently in any future pandemic?

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMMUNITY

What they found was important: we humans possess what some writers have called a psychological immune system, a capacity to adapt and respond effectively to stressful challenges.

There are factors that boost our psychological immunity when they are present and compromise our immunity when they are missing. Essentially, the quality of our connection to ourselves and to the world around us determines our capacity for healing.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMMUNITY BEGINS WITH THE BODY: sleep, nutrition, exercise, rest. Our health depends on the degree to which we can tune in sensitively to our body and mind and listen to what they need.

Psychological immunity also depends on having **A BASIC SENSE OF SECURITY** in the world; which translates for most of us into feeling generally safe in the world and having easy access to trusted relationships and social supports when we feel threatened.

Many of those who are now suffering haven't had access to anyone in a live personal way for a long time. When they most needed someone, that person, that service wasn't there for them. It doesn't matter why. At a time they most needed help, many were not able to access that help. Trust may have been compromised and need to be re-built. By now services should be offering full support and live personal face to face contact.

Current research in mental health has highlighted two groups that are needing attention: the "vulnerable we know" in our communities and the "new vulnerable" that are just emerging. This latter group who may never have had great distress in their lives, until now, after losing both loved ones and their livelihood. They may have neither the language to ask for help or any idea where to start looking. But they urgently need a range of personal and practical supports to enable them get back on their feet.

As critical and lifegiving as our connections are, we need to be with people but **WE NEED BOUNDARIES** to stop us being overwhelmed by other people's toxicity.

Covid-19 taught us practical ways to break the cycle of infection. We need spaces where we don't have to deal with toxicity. This is also true psychologically. We need to put spaces between us and all that is toxic in our world. In practical terms this may mean we limit our exposure to news cycles filled with stories on some new disaster or other; We may also need to put in place some boundary between ourselves and other people who can be hard to take because of the relentless dramas in their lives that they feel compelled to share at every available opportunity. There are also people whose cynicism can pull us down and sap our energies. Exposure to their toxic take on reality should be limited to small doses where possible, or we need to find some psychological equivalent of a mask where we don't allow their despair to get to us. Some people light up our lives; they lift us out of ourselves, but be careful, there are others who can wear us down and compromise our capacity to cope.

SUCSESSES NO MATTER HOW SMALL matter to our psychological immune system. Setting one or two goals daily that are achievable lifts our morale. Putting some shape on each day, doing less and being more focused gives us a sense of control. These strategies probably

matter less when we are on vacation with few demands and able to go with the flow each day. But the more we are under stress, the more burdens we have to carry, the more important they become.

Another pillar of psychological immunity is ***SPIRITUALITY***. Psychology is essentially and necessarily about the individual, the unique person that I am becoming, my ego, my Self potential to grow, and the many ways that I can get lost along the way. It's an rich, layered, fascinating story, but living inside my head can become very cramped. We need experiences that lift us out of ourselves and remind us we are part of something greater than us. I suspect lots of people have discovered these experiences for themselves in reconnecting with Nature, plunging into a vast ocean and felt exhilarated, lying under the stars, and discovering a new awareness of how we all depend on each other. If psychology is inviting each of us to grow up, spirituality invites us to wake up.

Think about moments you've had in the past year, where you felt alive and happy to be yourself, not anybody else. Maybe it was through reading or art or music that you discovered something that lifted it you and made you feel your life was worth living. Think about the circumstances that allowed that to happen and make sure you don't lose sight of these. These are moments of deep insight into what matters most in your life. We are wise not to lose sight of them as we re-enter "normality". This is not just our physical health or even mental health we're talking about. This is about the experience of being alive, of reclaiming some space to live more soulful lives.

We need to reclaim find ways to nourish the spiritual dimension of our lives. The shamanic tribes call this process 'soul retrieval'. Through careful rituals they bring communities on an inner journey to help them overcome some shock or trauma they had experienced, and give them some new more expansive story about their lives. We've had more than our fair share of shocks. We could do with some 'soul retrieval'.

WHAT DO WE WANT TO HOLD ONTO AND WHAT DO WE WANT TO LET GO?

Some of are apprehensive about 'going back' to an open society where its business as usual. Maybe our anxiety is not a bad thing. maybe it's not fear as much as it is an awareness that we don't want to go back to exactly how we lived before.

Let's not call what we're feeling fear; let's call an intelligent awareness that we have to make choices about how we are going to live as our society reopens; we know we've discovered some truths about how we want to live and with a return to so-called "normality", we could easily forget what we've learned and simply revert to our old habits. Maybe our anxiety does not mean there is anything wrong; it's simply saying that we have to make some decisions about how we want to live and need to get serious about what we want to keep and what we want to leave behind.

*The Pandemic Did Not Affect Mental Health the Way You Think by Lara Aknin, Jamil Zaki and Elizabeth Dunne. The Atlantic July 4th, 2021