



Coping With Life in Lockdown

What if we used the COVID-19 crisis to reconnect with others and ourselves?

In our highly interconnected world, is it really possible to run away from a pandemic? This is the first question I pondered after seeking refuge in my house in the remote countryside of southern France. As I looked at the olive trees, two stories that I had read many years ago came to mind.

The first is a retelling of an ancient Mesopotamian tale called “Appointment in Samarra”. According to this story, a merchant in Baghdad sent his servant to the marketplace for provisions. Soon afterwards, the servant ran in, white as a sheet. He said: “Master, just now in the marketplace, I was jostled by a woman in the crowd. When I looked closer, I realised that it was Death who made a threatening gesture towards me.”

Trembling with fear, the servant asked the merchant to let him borrow his fastest horse so he could flee to Samarra, a town more than one hundred kilometres away, where he believed Death wouldn’t be able to find him.

Sometime later, a bit annoyed but also curious, the merchant walked to the marketplace and found Death. He asked her why she had made such a threatening gesture. She replied, “It was only a sign of great surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

The second story, written by Edgar Allan Poe, is “The Masque of the Red Death”. It follows Prince Prospero's attempt to run from a plague known as the Red Death; retiring with the nobles of his court to one of his fortified abbeys. Locking the gates behind them, he organised a masquerade ball. But, in the midst of the revelry, a new guest made his appearance at midnight. As Prospero went to confront him and the ghoulish figure showed his face, the prince let out a scream and died. One by one, the other revellers met the same fate. The mysterious stranger was, of course, the Red Death.

The moral of both tales is that no mortal, whether a servant or a prince, can escape death. These two stories found their mark when the stonemason working in my garden informed me that his colleague has been diagnosed with the coronavirus. So much for my own attempt at running away.

The psychological impact of social distancing

Although we cannot escape death, we can make an effort to delay it. That is why the governments of so many countries are restricting people’s movement. They want everyone to isolate themselves and to engage in social distancing. These measures are reasonable steps to diminish the contagion and lessen the pressures on health systems that are already overburdened. But from a psychological perspective, how do these measures affect people?

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In terms of work, this “house arrest” isn’t necessarily a problem and may actually be a **welcome development**. For instance, office workers can by and large continue as before, with the main difference that they save themselves the trouble and cost of commuting. For others, the situation is far more of an issue.

We should keep in mind that *Homo sapiens* is first and foremost a social animal. A large body of research has shown that socially active people tend to have higher levels of physical and psychological wellbeing. As humans, we have a strong need for inclusion within a social collective. With all social gatherings prohibited, loneliness is sure to raise its ugly head. For some people, this sense of isolation will be extremely stressful.

What aggravates the situation is the fact that, in times of crisis, human beings like to come together to share experiences, show solidarity and help each other. Without any doubt, this time of crisis has arrived, as the coronavirus pandemic threatens people’s lives and livelihoods. It is exactly during such crises that we need social support the most. Togetherness can protect us against the negative impact that these events can have on our mental health.

Therefore, what’s asked from us – *although absolutely necessary in the greater scheme of things* – is exactly the opposite of what we human beings normally do. Not being able to seek the comfort of others just adds to the level of stress and anxiety already caused by the crisis.

The stress and anxiety is also creating in some people a fair amount of paranoia, a very rational reaction to feeling threatened by this “invisible enemy” around us. Unfortunately, paranoia compounds the distancing effect, adding fuel to the fire.

Staying connected with others but also ourselves

Hopefully, many of us have close family members who can serve as a buffer to minimise potential stress reactions. They may help us cope, even though in some situations, the extended amount of time spent in close quarters can raise tension. Nevertheless, the coronavirus pandemic provides an ideal opportunity to reconnect and strengthen relationships within the family.

Now many of us are trying to stay connected through calls, texts, emails and other virtual means. These alternative ways of remaining in contact can contribute to a sense of togetherness. They may be especially important to people who live alone. With fewer resources to draw upon, individuals may experience serious stress reactions.

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On the positive side, social isolation might be a never-seen-before opportunity to practice greater self-reflection. As we have been conditioned all our lives to run from one appointment to another, it has become far too easy to run away from ourselves. For example, embarking on an inner journey – hopefully, whenever possible, with a virtual guide – can be a great learning experience. It implies discovering what we stand for and finding out our strengths, our weaknesses, our values, our beliefs, our desires or, generally speaking, the major scripts in our inner theatre. While on this inner journey, we can try to work out what makes us laugh and to do more of it. We should work out what makes us cry and do less of it.

For one example of interpersonal reflectivity, listen to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, **speaking** about a daughter who had been in quarantine for two weeks:

“To tell you the truth, I had some of the best conversations with her that I’ve ever had... We talked about things in depth that we didn’t have time to talk about in the past...or we didn’t have the courage or the strength to talk about in the past – feelings I had, about mistakes I had made along the way that I wanted to express my regret and talk through with her.”

As the caterpillar needs to transform within its cocoon before it emerges as a butterfly, likewise, such a journey of reflectivity may have a great transformative impact. And most probably, we need this capacity for change, as the world will not be the same as before, after the passing of the coronavirus. As the well-known psychiatrist Victor Frankl once said, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

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