

Lockdown – Week 9

'When you can't control what's happening, challenge yourself to control the way you respond to what's happening. That's where your power is'.

Anon

At the beginning of lockdown, I began by writing a letter with information about how to access the school counselling service and to encourage your young people to keep talking through these extraordinary times. Nine weeks later I have continued to write weekly, largely with themes that have evolved from my own personal experiences of this time and of the young people with whom I have come into contact. In doing so, my hope has been to reach a slightly wider audience than I may have been able to do in 'real life' and hopefully share thoughts that may resonate or offer a nugget of something in some way. (It appears that blog writing time comes round quicker each week, mind!)

This week is Mental Health Awareness Week and it seems that Covid-19 is messing with everyone's mental health, albeit subtly (for some) as our lives continue to be disrupted or altered in numerous ways. Anxiety is sneaky and can often be hard to pinpoint because it may present itself in ways that seem unrelated. For example, one of the most common side effects of this pandemic is tiredness, even in people who are typically active. An article in the British Medical Journal talks about 'Covid Fatigue' taking an enormous toll on health care workers. It speaks of an initial eagerness to 'play our part in this crisis and get stuck in and make a difference', which has been replaced by an overwhelming fatigue. This describes not just intense tiredness and weariness, which many are feeling, but an irritability and disorientation that accompany it - for example not knowing which day of the week it is as the days appear to merge into one.

Whilst the BMJ was specifically talking about the Healthcare Professions and the effects of 'pandemic fatigue', I believe that many of us – perhaps especially our young people - may experience something similar in relation to our own circumstance and input in the crisis. For some of them, the initial euphoria of school closure and that jackpot 'snow day' feeling has subsided as the days have blended into weeks and the weeks into months - leaving them far from immune to feeling that anxiety and uncertainty which abounds in so many areas of their lives. Whilst they may not have realised it at the time, school offered a safety net of routine, guidance, direction, friendship, role models and learning – of ultimately allowing them opportunity to grow in a timely fashion, in accordance with their developmental phase. It is important here not to underestimate the magnitude of this temporary loss for those who initially thought they had dodged a bullet by not doing exams in the traditional way. Whilst they will now be forever known as the pandemic year, they lost the chance to complete their school lives as everyone else has done. As we know, endings are so crucial; we, as parents or teachers or friends in different year groups, **none** of us can say – 'Oh that happened when I was at school'.

Our young people are unique and no doubt unique and inventive endings will be found that befit such trying times but they are all truly feeling the losses and the isolation to varying degrees. They too are anxious, and also may be overtly tired. This often isn't just laziness (although sometimes it is.... sorry kids!). Their futures are currently uncertain and unpredictable. In 'real life', predictability helps us to feel that we are in control, offering reassurances that our lives are settled and nothing bad will happen. Having to deal with the unknowns of a pandemic can make us feel anxious, but by practising 'tolerating uncertainty', we can try and get a handle on anxiety, in whichever form it presents itself.

*Beth (18), brilliantly reflected '... like you keep saying Anna, routine is really important, but I've actually done a few things breaking from the 'new routine' the last few weeks and I really enjoy those! Something out of our 'new normal'! I had a bath in the middle of the day with my book, we had tea at the table for the first time in weeks (mum does jigsaws) and my eleven year old cousin made tea for her whole family **on her own** yesterday. It was very impressive. It's really important to find new ways to communicate with your friends though. I have written and received **actual** handwritten letters in the post. Amazing! I think taking a sidestep is always fun. Whether it's with what you're reading or baking or something a little 'out there' - we all know banana bread is easy, but why not try a Bake-Off technical challenge? I want to try Choux pastry. I'm trying to make a summer plan, in view that this may happen for a long time. I have a friend who lives in Skipton with a lovely garden, so we were talking about having a picnic on her lawn. At a distance, with cocktails. They are doing virtual tours round museums, so me and some friends were talking about watching them with Skype open so we could chatter as we went!'*

So, Beth has already figured out that even in our temporary new world, we can still make creative, fun plans which were not the ones we had made pre-pandemic. She is willing to try out and test new things which fall within our limited remit. Even if they don't go as planned, she is trying - and is practising tolerating uncertainty.

*For Kirsty (18), '...2020 (gap year) was supposed to be the best year of my life. In early January I set off on my travels with my best friend. We had planned to be away for eight months travelling South East Asia, Australia, NZ, Fiji and finishing in Japan for the 2020 Olympics, where we had tickets to the athletics finals. We were fortunate enough to travel most of South East Asia, however when we got to Bali realised, we were unable to continue. Gutted, but thankful to be home safely. I know the future is very uncertain for many people. For me, I don't know what will happen with my Uni place. Will freshers happen? Will I get the chance to meet lots of new people? Do I really want to pay to study online? Will I get to move out and be independent? For now, I don't know the answer to any of these questions and that uncertainty is scary for me. I have good and bad days. For me, my best days happen when I get up early (that's about 9am!) and do something physical. Just by getting changed into my PE gear helps me mentally on those days.....and I have surprised myself by learning Spanish, painting by numbers and getting better at quizzes! I know I **need** to keep positive and believe that it's not going to last for ever and one day I **will** get to finish my travels.'*

Kirsty, like thousands of young people at such a crucial time in her life, had her dreams dashed whilst she was living them. In accepting the loss of so much that was meant to be she has been able to reflect on what skills she used in the past to cope with uncertainty- but also added new levels of strength and survival techniques to her pre-existing toolkit. These will serve her tenfold, going forward. I imagine that we all of us - young and old - have created new routines and rituals, which will continue to be supremely important at this time when parts of our lives remain so disrupted. It is in taking the power over the things we can control, rather than the things that we cannot, that will help us with our Covid fatigue and with our day to day lives. So, on that note – please all stay safe and be kind to each other and hopefully enjoy some fun, creative (socially distanced) times over half term.

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