

How the COVID Pandemic has taught me to be a better doctor/psychiatrist

"Write hard and clear, about what hurts." — Ernest Hemingway

It is hard to believe that we are slowly but surely coming full circle. This time last year we were waking up to the intangible and surely unassailable rumblings in the world outside our collective selves. This year we find ourselves subsisting alongside a spectre that continually seeks its pound of flesh.

I am joined by many friends and colleagues who have and continue to devote their professional lives to being part of the most profound lived experience that our profession has ever faced. This has been achieved at great personal cost; loss of life and time away from our loved ones that we can never get back.

"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin." — William Shakespeare

There is hope in a collective suffering that continues to test our capacity and endurance. Holmes and Rahe's enduring inventory of the 1960s reminds us of the stresses we endure. From the mundane to the devastating, there is comfort in a framework that gives voice to often overwhelming and hard to articulate experiences.

There is no question that the stress associated with life and living has existed pre-COVID. In mental health settings it is well acknowledged in those seeking our support. It is equally prevalent in professional lives, enabling us to find common ground in our attempts to alleviate the afflicted. From navigating a series of setbacks we seem to have transitioned to a concerted crisis, striving to find a way forwards in mutual suffering.

"As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands, one for helping yourself, the other for helping others." – Maya Angelou

As a passive participant in the school of life I am constantly reminded that the past cannot provide anything meaningful in the absence of reflection. The role of significant others in nudging me towards this uncertain present stands out on a well-worn mantle of memories. My life began in the NHS to a young homemaker and a junior doctor in training. Their message of finding gratitude in small, yet life enhancing situations and making a purposeful contribution is a lesson that is hard to ignore. I continue to benefit from their shared wisdom whilst attempting to find my purpose. I have been fortunate in other relationships as well, both personal and professional, serving as beacons of solace along the way. If life began as an island remote and aloof, it is now a thriving archipelago enriched by its members.

The topography of life is continually disrupted, caught in the seismic torrents of change. Jolted repeatedly after each period of complacency, I now grudgingly concede that all life experiences play a crucial role in regularly examining our place in the present. We are thus propelled to repurpose ourselves for future survival. This

most perilous pandemic has laid out in stark relief more frailties than I have ever cared to acknowledge.

This time last year I found myself at a crossroads in my career. The training wheels were gradually coming off and future consultant-hood appeared less abstract. As the storm clouds gathered on the horizon, I mentally grafted more steel to my spine in watchful anticipation with others. The professional pandemic would have to wait though, for I had unknowingly begun my descent into perdition with an unwelcome assailant as my guide. There soon followed days and weeks of isolation as I took leave of formerly unappreciated roles and freedoms.

There is no greater relief than finding oneself still afloat after the passage of a virulent storm. Restitution soon followed although I was far from restored. I had stumbled out of a savage nether world unaware of the pernicious transformation that had taken place within. A well-tested idiom wisely counsels getting back on the horse following an existential crisis. What of the horse so diminished in flesh and spirit that it yearns to be put out of its misery?

Thankfully hope was rekindled by the helping hands of those I had prepared to lead. A strange new realisation dawned that any perceived shortcomings could be easily mitigated up by a support system of friends and colleagues. In their quest to endure as a team it was impossible to lag behind. Sustenance also came unexpectedly from those we serve with overwhelming compassion in navigating shared goals. I reluctantly thanked the menace for robbing me of my paltry pre-COVID self so that I could be enriched by the contribution of others.

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” — Viktor E. Frankl

The old and familiar must make way for the reformed. As the oppressive summer drew to a close I quietly shed the nomadic life of a trainee, emerging as a chastened pandemic-era consultant psychiatrist. I was weary after a long and arduous climb but it has never been a solitary journey. It is shared by all those who have and continue to negotiate this with me.

My training has prepared me to nurture the only skill set a humble psychiatrist has at its disposal- to listen, perceive and be present. In the competing see-saw of work and life I shall endeavour to be mindful of moments when I am less able to keep up. I have a team to keep me in check; friends, family, colleagues, patients, carers, countless others and an organisation that is wise to be inclusive of us all.

It is early days yet and I am still finding my voice. The inner voice grows stronger, the outer one still affected by a personal pandemic. There are many changes to reconcile in ourselves and the world around us. A harsh reality has made us evaluate our old and unimaginative ways, replacing this with more thoughtful and

efficient means to engage ourselves and the world. We are present and keeping safe whilst social separation is being overcome by yet more novel ways to keep in touch. Relationships and contacts are no longer taken for granted, bringing us together like never before. In our professional world engaging ourselves and our communities has always been a challenge. There is renewed commitment and purpose to our engagement. We must have the courage to listen, reflect and adapt when this is asked of us.

The pandemic has struck our culturally diverse communities the hardest, divesting us of many multigenerational contributors to this proud collective of island nations. It is heartening to witness oft-circumscribed and marginalised *others* find their own voice and purpose in these hard times; reaching out to provide relief beyond their communities. Alongside a deadly isolating scourge, hope also spreads in tandem bringing us together in unprecedented spirit. There is much inspiration to be drawn from our diverse communities and diverse colleagues.

As I embark on a career in perinatal mental health, maintaining the integrity of families and future generations has never felt more compelling. I am proud to be part of a professional team that is open to learning from the lived experience of those who attend our services, often remaining as valued collaborators. We continue to learn and grow together while engaging our communities. Listening to our diverse communities has enhanced our efforts in engaging them and those involved in their care. Their voices and experiences are represented in our contact with a range of professionals across health and social care, ensuring befitting access to healthcare and opportunities.

As we repurpose our services in the pandemic era, the trust and confidence of those we serve must also be nurtured. Therapeutic conversations must continue beyond working hours and the workplace, ensuring our communities and their support systems remain in touch. Purposeful engagement from our service continues via digital platforms, the media and in community settings. We are also mindful that the basic needs of our communities must be met if we hope to succeed. Our efforts have been enhanced by working alongside and contributing to voluntary and community organisations. Our family is growing as we serve our communities in shared fraternity and partnership.

I am certain that I am not alone in my experience of finding it hard to reflect on the many changes this past year, particularly whilst the present remains so uncertain. As the devastation continues, there is a bewildering realisation that it took a pandemic to remind us of our resilience and capacity to evolve. I am keen to devote both personal and professional resources in listening to our communities whilst finding shared engagement and purpose. I am continually reminded by my friends, colleagues and the communities we serve; that there is much in the way of personal capital that is immeasurable and inextinguishable. There is still so much left to give. In a perpetuating cycle of love, loss and life we must endure, assuredly never alone.

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Added by invigilator: My service does a lot of work in engaging diverse communities and ensuring their needs are met. We do fundraising/charity work for deprived communities (alongside 3rd sector organisations) as part of our wider engagement strategy. My thoughts were to contribute to this fund. However I will be involving the team leadership when it comes to allocation of prize money (if my submission deserves this) to ensure it is appropriately spent.