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If successful I would re-invest the prize money in my podcast – which aims to provide free high quality information about mental health: <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/maudsley-learning-podcast/id1466932169#episodeGuid=Buzzsprout-4562609>

## How COVID Pandemic has taught me to be a better psychiatrist

### Introduction

The past year has been turbulent like no other in most people's memory. Strangely, with this turbulence has come much solitude. While far from being amongst the worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, I have faced my share of difficulties. I have been separated from loved ones, worked with patients in desperate situations, and have had to confront some of the darker aspects of my nature which are normally masked by the frenzy of the everyday.

Behind such challenges I believe lurks the opportunity for growth. As a psychiatrist I feel I am in the business of growth. That by the different means at my disposal I try to facilitate an environment for my patients such that their lives move in a better direction. This could involve the alleviation of negative experiences (lessening anxiety, lifting depression) but could also take the form of positive achievement (getting a job, reconnecting with one's spouse). In my experience, there is much to learn from my patients. Similarly, there is much I have learned from my own collisions with life which I have found helpful in the clinic.

For me, the past year has been a confrontation with stress, fear, self-doubt, loneliness and the unforgiving. Through these obstacles however I have learned much. What truly adds value to my life? What is the difference between pain and suffering? What does it mean to be

self-compassionate? What is the difference between intelligence and wisdom? I do not have final answers to these questions, but I have begun to learn lessons which I have found immensely helpful to get through difficult times with greater ease. The most sublime part of this process however, is to have the opportunity to share my experiences with my patients and colleagues, and to discover what a joy that can be.

### I. There are Times to Control, There are Times to Release

Modern life is a lot about control, predictability and convenience. As technological innovation has transformed our lives, so have our unconscious attitudes towards what should be. This tendency is what has allowed human beings to become the dominant species on the planet. We have become so successful at establishing control of our lives that when the pandemic began in the beginning of 2020, most of us (including myself) reacted to it as though it were a nuisance, like substandard customer service. As the harsher reality of the situation emerged over subsequent months, we despaired at how powerless we had really become over major aspects of our lives - such as whether we could leave the house, who we could see or where we could go.

Yet there is an alternative to merely 'not being in control', and that is to be a state of release. This is a state of accepting reality for how it is, rather than how one wishes it to be. The dichotomy of control and release is reflected in our nervous system, which has a sympathetic component (for attack, retreat and generally getting things done) and a parasympathetic component (for rest, digestion and recharging). Increasingly, I find myself in situations where I am in 'control' but going nowhere, and have become more adept at knowing when to release. For me, 'Release' looks like turning off the news, meditating regularly, appreciating a sunset and savouring what's in front of me. The value of release is to know there is a sense of calm that can be found in each moment, even when you don't get what you want.

## II Pain and Suffering are Not the Same Thing

Not being able to see loved ones, to have certain freedoms taken away, to treat patient after patient in crisis are all painful experiences. More often than not, pain quickly bleeds into suffering, and we tend to experience the two as one tangled negative experience. In dialectical behaviour therapy (which I have been fortunate to gain some exposure to), patients are taught to make the distinction between pain and suffering. In doing so one realises that while pain is inevitable, suffering is often optional. Not only is pain inevitable, it is actually useful - pain is a signal from reality that something is not right. We would not want to live a life without pain, but if we can examine our mental reactions to pain, we can begin to live a life with remarkably less suffering.

If pain is a difficult on-call shift, suffering is the self-critical internal monologue that follows. For me, this can sound like '*You did a terrible job in that situation*', '*You should have known that was going to happen*', '*You should think about changing careers*'. Suffering is the unhelpful mental process which occurs in reaction to a painful experience. It demands impossible standards and sets us up for failure. It views every failure as a final verdict on your value. Time has allowed me to make this distinction between pain and suffering more proactively, and in the space created by a reduction in suffering I have found room for something more helpful, which is compassion.

## III Compassion is Something You can Give to Yourself

Loneliness is not merely being by oneself, but is a deeper pain resulting from being alone and feeling in some way insufficient as a result. We respond to loneliness by seeking the company of others, in the hope that they can provide us what we cannot provide for ourselves. Of course if they cannot, then we can even feel lonely in the presence of other people. But what if being with others is no longer an option? It feels strange to try and find something within that

we normally get from others, but this becomes less strange when we realise (on close inspection) that we really exist in relationship to ourselves. We know this because after all, we talk to, negotiate with and must discipline ourselves. We have inner-conflicts and at the best of times find it difficult to get all of our various oars rowing in the same direction.

Once one accepts that one is in a relationship with themselves, then the question becomes, what kind of relationship do you want to have? As the months of lockdown wore on, I realised through reflection and personal psychotherapy that the relationship I had with myself was good in many ways, but was significantly lacking in self-compassion. By this I mean, I did not actively accept myself as I happened to be at any given moment. I realised that unconsciously I was seeking this in other people, and that meant that when I was isolated from others, the isolation was that much more stark and painful. For me, self-compassion has been a key piece in the puzzle in learning how to be alone and not lonely.

#### IV Do Not Confuse Intelligence with Wisdom

Intelligence and wisdom are easily conflated, and the difference between the two often emerges as one moves through difficult situations in life. We live in a time arguably where we are surrounded by 'intelligence' - in the form of technology, access to knowledge, debate and yet there seems to be a dearth of wisdom and perspective. Many works of popular fiction illustrate this point through the 'wise idiot' archetype - the character who does not possess what we think of as intelligence, yet who has a grasp on something more intangible about the nature of things that some supposedly more intelligent people may not have.

Although intelligence is obviously very useful, it can be used to deceive oneself and others, to rationalise poor decisions and to justify destructive behaviour. The difficulties and tensions of the pandemic have forced me to confront the difference between the two in my own mind. When faced with something I do not like, I am talented at producing intelligent

workarounds. This can sound like *'I am an exception to the rules because ...'*, *'the transmission rates outside have not been adequately examined ...'* and other similar rationalisations. I have learned that intelligence must be nested within wisdom. Wisdom is more about appreciating the big picture, and having the courage to wrestle with reality as it is rather than trying to manipulate reality to suit your goal. Sometimes wisdom is more about inaction than action. Under the right circumstances, wisdom can be just staying at home.

### Conclusion

Coronavirus has subtracted a lot from our lives, including the comforts that normally insulate us from some of the more fundamental and tragic aspects of life. Solitude has forced me to come to terms with myself. I have become a student of my emotions (especially the negative ones), and have made friends with fear, shame and laziness. Some of what I have learned has helped me to see my patients more clearly, and to know that often, the only difference between doctor and patient is mere circumstance.

My hope is that with greater self-acceptance, I can better accept my patients as they are. That I can help them navigate the difference between pain and suffering in their own lives, motivate them to have compassion for themselves when they cannot find it in others, and move in the direction of wisdom in trying times. This is of course a lifelong process, but if nothing else I am grateful for the self-examination the pandemic has catalysed in me, and for it to help me to help others has been the greatest privilege.