



Life²

Lessons from lockdown

What we can learn and
how we can move forward
from coronavirus

This booklet is one of a series by Life Squared. Our no-nonsense resources help you explore what it means to be a human being in the modern world, and how you can live with clarity, curiosity and compassion within it.

Life Squared helps you navigate the complexity of life so you can live in a happier, wiser and more meaningful way.

We offer guides, courses, ideas and advice on a wide range of topics, from 'How to find meaning' through to 'How to live ethically', and from 'The problem with consumerism' through to 'How to be happy'.

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Introduction



The Covid-19 pandemic has been a once-in-a-generation global crisis. It has turned all of our lives upside down.

As we slowly emerge from lockdown, dusting ourselves down and looking tentatively to the future (including the knowledge that further waves of the virus could return), we at Life Squared think it's time to reflect on what's happened, and consider some of the lessons we've learned from the pandemic and lockdown.

What have you learnt – about yourself, other people and the wider world? What have you missed the most? Have there been some positive aspects of lockdown? How can you see the experience changing your life in the future?

This publication sets out some lessons, both from our perspective at Life Squared, and also from our members and website users who have contributed their ideas through conversations and surveys. These lessons can help guide us towards the sort of lives and society we want to build in the future, as well as helping us respond better if any form of crisis hits our own life again - from a broken leg to sudden unemployment to another pandemic.

Thank you to everyone who sent us your thoughts. At the end of some of the lessons are links to other Life Squared publications, for you to explore a particular topic in more detail.

Although the lockdown restrictions are beginning to ease, this will be far from the end of the crisis for many people. It has been a period of immense trauma and stress, and we need to give ourselves time to process and deal with what has happened.

We have yet to see what impact it will have on our mental health, lives and world-views, but we should allow ourselves the time and space to reacclimatise and shouldn't be surprised if we feel a sense of shock, sadness, tiredness or many other emotions as time goes by. We need to reassure ourselves it's OK to feel like this as we've been through a major event.

With this in mind, the process of coming out of lockdown may not be a simple case of 'starting things up again' for many of us. After this period of trauma, we may feel uncomfortable or anxious about the tap of our normal lives being switched on again. So we will begin the booklet with a section to help you decide for yourself how you want to come out of lockdown, and what you want your life to look like afterwards.

PART 1

How to emerge from lockdown



Step one - reflect on the experience of lockdown

Overall, it's worth taking the time to remember what's actually happened during this extraordinary period and what this experience has felt like for you, as only then might you realise the full impact it has had.

This was (hopefully) a once in a lifetime and once in a generation event, in which the freedoms, relationships and services we take for granted on a daily basis were taken away from us, our livelihoods were threatened, and a global pandemic threatened the lives of us and our loved ones.

We suggest that many people, even those not personally affected by Covid-19 themselves or in their immediate family, could experience a delayed reaction to this traumatic period. We may feel tired, sad or angry - and that's understandable given the extent of what we've lived through.

Let's briefly reflect on what happened during lockdown.

Many of us may have forgotten certain events with all that has happened in the last year, but remember the sense of fear and anxiety you felt when supermarket shelves became empty and queues started forming due to panic buying?

Or, think back to reading the news to see how the virus was spreading around the world and in your own country, with concerns that the health service would be overwhelmed. We've seen public broadcasts by our leaders that would have seemed unthinkable a few years ago, in which they told us we were not allowed to leave our houses or mix with other people - for months.

As well as separating us from our friends and loved ones, these restrictions have also affected our daily lives. Children haven't been at school, which has placed a great strain on parents, not only giving them the impossible task of trying to balance their own work commitments with childcare and helping their children to learn, but also leading to additional worries about the mental health, education and welfare of their children. Our working lives have been turned upside down, and for many people work has completely dried up with nothing to replace it. Whilst this unprecedented range of stresses has been acting on us, we've had very few chances to escape the home and relieve the pressure, which has affected many peoples' mental health and relationships.

This is just a brief summary of a few of the impacts that Covid-19 and lockdown have had on our lives. Under normal conditions, just one of these factors would be considered a life-impacting event (for example the loss of a job). But in recent months, nearly all of us have been subject to many of these impacts.

Take a moment to reflect on what happened to you over this time and how you felt.

Once you have reflected on all this, you may start to feel tired and overwhelmed by what you have been through. And that's ok! We've been living through an extraordinary, once-in-a-generation period, and it's useful to acknowledge this before we move on. Processing what you've been through is the first step in helping you to move on from lockdown and pick your life up again.

As you emerge from lockdown, remember that you might also feel overwhelmed or tired at times, and that will be a perfectly natural consequence of what you've been through. If you are experiencing distress or problems with your thoughts or mental health, you should consult your GP or other trusted healthcare provider. We have also given some details of mental health charities at the end of this chapter.

A second useful step is to reflect on how you felt about lockdown. Here are some words our supporters came up with to describe their experience - Interesting, Weird, Change, Hard, Rollercoaster, Repetitive, Draining, Stressful, Transformative.

There may of course have been some positive things about lockdown as well as negative. Here are some more words from our supporters about both:

- **Positive things** - peace and quiet, spending more time with immediate family, less traffic

on roads, more exercise, more sleep, more time, reduced waste, more time to try new hobbies, not commuting, enjoying nature.

- **Negative things** - adapting to changes at work, solitude - not being able to see family and friends, feeling tied down, overeating, days when you're not able to get outside, the stress of home-schooling, pressure on relationships, financial worries, stress about the news, threats to job security.

Give yourself a few minutes to reflect on how you felt about lockdown at different points, and see what words or phrases you come up with. This can be a simple and interesting way to understand your experience of the events.

Step two - identify your lessons from lockdown

Next, take some time to consider what, if anything, has made a big impact on you during lockdown and the Covid-19 crisis, or anything you have learnt about yourself, others or the world around you.

In the second part of this booklet we will explore a range of lessons that we and our supporters have learnt. You may agree with some, all or none of these points, and you may well have other lessons and observations of your own.

Whatever lessons you take from this extraordinary

period, consider whether there are any adjustments you might make in your life in the light of them, in order to make it more meaningful, enjoyable or better in other ways. Then think about how you can make these changes. For example, perhaps you've realised who the friends are that really matter to you and that you need to give more time to them. Or that you actually enjoy a slower pace of life, and you might look to live a less frantic life than before lockdown.

Step three - review your priorities in life

As we emerge from lockdown, battered and bruised, changed people in a changed world, now seems like a perfect time to pull back and reflect on our priorities in life. Partly because we may have learnt some lessons from lockdown, but also because the world and our lives have changed, and we may need to adapt to this changed landscape.

One of the few positives that some people have been able to salvage from the pandemic has been to give them a clearer idea of the things that provide them with a genuine sense of meaning. Things they've particularly missed or things that have kept them going during this period.

So, take this opportunity to reflect on your priorities. Take yourself somewhere peaceful and quiet, perhaps

in nature, away from the influence of other people.

Have a think about what matters to you in life and what gives you pleasure. Try to consider this honestly, without judging yourself or wondering what other people might think about your choices. If you want to, write a short list (up to around 5) of these things.

If you have time, perhaps also consider things that you've considered as priorities up to now that, upon reflection, have less meaning for you. Then consider how to build the real priorities into your life more - and release time on the old priorities to make more time for them.

Let's use this situation in which we have a greater focus on what matters to us to consider how we can prioritise these things more in our lives as we emerge from lockdown.

Step four - Decide how to emerge from lockdown

As lockdown begins to be eased, it may feel overwhelming to feel the world opening up again, along with all the opportunities, commitments and social anxieties that come with it.

Having been through a period of living a restricted life, having more options suddenly thrown at you again may feel too much. Even if the lockdown is being released slowly, it may feel like things are

happening too fast for comfort.

This opening up of choice and increasing of pressure is likely to be amplified by the voices around you. As with many other aspects of the modern world, you will be surrounded by external influences and pressures, including media, advertisements and friends, to ‘go crazy’ after lockdown, make up for lost time, treat yourself, throw parties to see your friends again and resume all the activities you’ve missed during the lockdown period.

But, as we will see, you may not want to go back to how life was before lockdown. You may want to change some things. So pause, and resist these pressures! Resolve to go at your own pace and decide for yourself how you come out of lockdown, and what your life will look like.

To help you do this, create a simple plan in your head for how you intend to emerge from lockdown. What are your priorities in the first few weeks? The next 6 months? And just deal with those. Don’t try to cram too much in - you don’t need to gorge yourself on people, activities and experiences, as all this will still be there for you in the future.

The thinking you did in step two about the lessons you’ve learnt from lockdown will help you work out what some of your priorities might be as you go forward.

Further resources

Mind – the mental health charity - www.mind.org.uk,
infoline 0300 123 3393

Samaritans - www.samaritans.org, helpline 116 123

The image features three white surgical masks with pinkish-red horizontal stripes, arranged diagonally on a solid red background. The masks are positioned in the upper right, middle right, and lower left areas. Each mask has white elastic ear loops. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

PART 2

Lessons from Lockdown

In this section we will explore a range of lessons that we, and other people, have learnt from the Covid-19 crisis and the experience of lockdown.

Needless to say, these are just a limited set of examples and may not apply to everyone. But we hope we have covered some of the main points, and opened up some new ideas. Everyone's experience will have been different, so as part of your process of emerging from lockdown, have a think about the lessons you have learnt from this period and how you might use them to improve your life in the future.

ONE

Don't take your lifestyle for granted



In the modern world, we tend to take a lot of things for granted. That our supermarket shelves will be full of everything we need. That electricity will flow into our plug sockets whenever we require it. That we will be free to live our lives as we please.

The Covid-19 crisis reminds us that we should take none of these things for granted.

Our lifestyles are supported by incredibly complex processes, trading and structures that stretch around the world and take place without us noticing. Yet as these processes became interrupted by the pandemic, we saw the impact at the end of the line - when shelves became empty.

We should each try to build a greater awareness of how the world around us works, and the services and systems that keep our lifestyles afloat. Many of these systems have an enormous impact on the environment - just to maintain the lifestyles we have got used to.

We should also ask whether we can make adjustments in our lives to enable us to rely less on this growing complexity - from growing our own vegetables, to buying less stuff, through to shopping more locally. Many of these changes have the great side effect of significantly reducing our environmental impact too.

It's not just the supply systems behind our lifestyles that we should be more aware of. It's our fundamental ability to live peaceful, free lives. Our government had the power to make lockdown happen - to restrict our

freedoms and engage the police to enforce this.

During a global pandemic, this action was universally believed to be the right thing to do - and it was clearly necessary in order to combat the crisis. But this (perfectly legal) restriction of our liberties should give us pause for thought, as it shows us the extraordinary freedom that we usually have in our lives, and that this freedom is not guaranteed.

When we vote for a government, we are entrusting it to maintain these freedoms for us and look after us. Yet there are many other styles of government than liberal democracies, and different politicians and parties even within our own system have different views on the levels of freedom we should have. In the UK there is not often disagreement on our ability to move about freely, but there are differing opinions on issues such as levels of press freedom, the right to protest and other important freedoms.

The point here is simply that we should not take any of our freedoms for granted. We should take time to understand those that matter, how they can be eroded, and make sure we participate more in politics to stand up for our rights and ensure these freedoms are protected. We choose the politics (and therefore the lifestyles) we get - and if we don't each take this responsibility seriously, others will decide this for us, and we might not like the results.

Further resources

[The Story of Energy](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2012

[How to be civilised](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2016

[It always lies below](#), Timothy Garton Ash, The Guardian, September 2005

TWO

Invest in the things that matter



One core area of debate within politics is how much public money should be given to the state and its institutions. Some people believe that the state's role should be minimal, people should pay less tax and be able to make their own choices about how to spend their money. Others believe that the state provides a critical safety net for everyone, and that by contributing a bit more in tax, we are all playing our role to build better lives for everyone, not just those who can afford it, and by extension we are building a safer, fairer and kinder society as a result.

The Covid-19 crisis seems to have shown how important it is to have strong state institutions - and we can show this with just three examples - health care, education and social welfare.

The importance of the NHS during the pandemic cannot be understated. It has been there for people throughout, and been tirelessly dedicated to saving lives. It has treated each life as of equal value, no matter what the person's income or background.

We have also seen the importance of our education system - with schools as not just places of education but sources of well-being for our children and free childcare for parents, enabling them to live their lives and get out to work, earning more money for the economy.

During the Covid-19 crisis we have also witnessed

the highest level of public spending (in terms of proportion of gross domestic product (GDP)) since the second world war. The government has not just been supporting individuals with this spending - such as the £20-a-week top up in Universal Credit, and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) which has paid up to 80% of some self-employed people's previous profits. It has also supported businesses and other areas of the economy - through initiatives such as the Coronavirus Job Retention scheme (or furlough scheme) and grants and loans to businesses. This has been a massive expenditure - but where would we have been as a country if the government has been opposed to investing public money in it?

The aim of this section isn't to make a cheap political point. It's to show that we need to be realistic and honest about the things we value and need, not just as individuals, but as a society. We all end up falling back on the state at times like the Covid-19 pandemic, so we need to fund its services properly.

The Covid-19 crisis demonstrates the importance of a properly funded state, with services that are free to access by all and that treat everyone equally, regardless of their income or background.

THREE

Appreciate invisible workers



There's rightly been a lot of appreciation for nurses and health workers - those working at the front end of tackling the Covid-19 crisis. Their bravery, willingness to risk their own health for the sake of others and their dedication (sometimes in the face of threat and provocation) is extraordinarily humbling, and we should all not only be grateful to them but should do our bit to support their fight for better pay and working conditions.

But the Covid-19 crisis has also brought into sharp focus the critical role that millions of other people play in sustaining our lives and economy, and who have kept our country going during lockdown.

The most obvious of these for parents are teachers, whose tireless work, nurturing and care for our children plays more of a role in their lives and wellbeing than we could possibly have realised.

But what about the others? The people with the jobs that are often the most invisible, lowest paid and least appreciated, but that have kept our country moving. These include supermarket workers, vegetable pickers, delivery drivers, call centre workers, and the contractors who keep our utilities and other services working.

These workers - and many others - have been under enormous strain during lockdown, bearing the pressure of our reliance on them. They have dealt with this pressure - often for little additional reward

- and we should both recognise their contribution in this period, and respect the jobs that they do on an ongoing basis. You don't have to earn a high salary, be a celebrity or have a glamorous, jet-setting job in order to make a critical contribution to society - and we should all learn this in the light of Covid-19.

Let's go forward with a sense of gratitude for their help, respect for their work and do everything we can to support them in gaining fair pay and good working conditions.

FOUR

Don't take life for granted

Perhaps you have been struck down by Covid-19 yourself, or know people who have. You may even know people who have died from it. We have all been affected by hearing the news and seeing the images of the sheer volume of people whose lives and health have been turned upside down or ended by Covid-19.

As a result, the pandemic has led many of us to encounter serious illness and death at much greater proximity than we might have experienced before.

This can be quite a shocking thing for us to acknowledge, as we spend most of our time in western societies trying to ignore the reality of death and the finitude of our lives. We should take this opportunity to remind ourselves that life is finite, a unique opportunity to exist, and that we should make the most of the remaining time we have to live.

Another lesson, linked to this, is that we are in far less control of our lives than we think. A common fallacy in the modern world is the idea that we are in control of our own lives, and that we can bend everything to our will, just by seizing the day and making it happen.

This is of course nonsense. One of the most useful skills in life is to be able to work out what we can and can't control in the world, and to focus on the things we can control. Coming to terms with this and adapting to it can help us lead a less anxious, more fulfilled and productive life.

The Covid-19 crisis also reminds us that there are no certainties in life. We don't know what will be around the corner, so we must appreciate and make the most of each day we have.

This will include prioritising the things that give us greater meaning in life, but it should also prompt us to give greater time and attention to appreciating the very fact that we are alive.

Many of us tend to be so busy and absorbed in the pressure and rush of everyday living that we rarely (if ever) take time to step back from our lives and appreciate the remarkable fact that we are alive and what this really means. Doing this regularly can be one of the great pleasures of life, and can contribute to a greater sense of meaning.

We should also remember to savour the experience of being alive, as well as our individual experiences. This doesn't have to just mean peaceful reflection, as we can appreciate both the busier and quieter aspects of life. For example, it can be satisfying to reflect on the enjoyment we are feeling when we are in the middle of busy, social experiences with other people, such as parties. Taking a few seconds to do this occasionally can enable us to 'check in' with ourselves during these experiences and fully appreciate them.

Appreciating the finitude and experience of life like this could also prompt us to approach the task of living with a greater sense of wonder and curiosity -

and revitalise the way we see the world.

Further resources

[How to think about death \(and life\)](#), Richard Docwra
Life Squared, 2015

[Life - and how to think about it](#), Richard Docwra, Big
Idea Books, 2021

FIVE

We are stronger
and more adaptable
than we think



There will no doubt be many books, films and stories written in the future about people's experiences of the pandemic. Many of these will be produced because they are extraordinary in some way - particularly sad, especially heroic or singularly consequential for the world.

But we have all been through a lot during the pandemic. Each of us has a story of adversity, hardship and challenge. Our own stories may not feel glamorous - in fact, the sheer mundanity and grinding repetitiveness of our lives during this period has been one of the hardest things to endure. But the important point is that we have come out the other side.

We may have lost things, suffered and emerged from the experience battered and exhausted, but we have made it through a (hopefully) once-in-a-generation global crisis.

We should give ourselves credit for this.

There may be many times when we have not met the standards we have set for ourselves - whether it's in the quality of the support we've given to our children while they're learning at home, our ability to focus on our own work, or our hope of writing a novel with the spare time we had rather than watching box sets. But perhaps the standards we were setting ourselves just weren't realistic. We didn't have any warning of this pandemic - it just happened to us and we had to cope as best we could.

And, as you are still alive and reading this, perhaps your coping strategy wasn't as bad as you thought. We're stronger, more resilient and more adaptable than we might think - so let's give ourselves credit for this.

SIX

Less can
mean more



A common comment about lockdown is that life has been much simpler. We have had most of our options in life cut off. Another common comment made by our supporters - and many other people - is that they have enjoyed this simpler existence.

There are many benefits to the massive number of options we have in our lives in the modern world. If we can afford to, we can go almost anywhere, buy almost anything, do countless things. But this endless choice carries some disadvantages too.

There are social, economic and cultural pressures surrounding us to live busy, fast-paced lives, in which we have as many new experiences as possible, and socialise as much as possible. Before lockdown, many of us felt exhausted by the expectations and pace of the modern world, and wanted to be able to say 'no' to more things, but felt it difficult to do so as it was an important part of 'fitting in' generally.

But in lockdown, we have been forced to do much less. This has restricted our lives greatly, but it has also given us more time - whether we want it or not.

Some of us have spent this extra time doing other things we enjoy, trying new things, relaxing or just trying to manage the other pressures that have come through lockdown.

Others have found it has enabled them to get more from the remaining activities they are able to do, as they can appreciate them more, rather than rushing

about and thinking about the other things they need to do. To quote one of our supporters, who seemed to enjoy their simplified weekly routine - “walking every Wednesday evening with a friend. Making soup every Sunday. Going to the market on Saturday, get some quality fish and chicken.”

Although it may have taken some adjusting to get used to the extra time you have had, it’s worth reflecting on whether it has brought any benefits for you that you might want to take into post-lockdown life.

Clearly, for many of us, lockdown has prevented us from doing some of the things we value and enjoy. But it’s also removed some of the things that we didn’t enjoy and that were of little value to us in our lives - and even some things that were damaging our lives. For example, does anyone really miss commuting for 4 hours a day every day, just because your workplace culture (incorrectly, as it turned out) believed that the only way your team could function effectively was when you were all in the office all the time?

As we start moving out of lockdown, take some time to reflect on whether you’ve enjoyed the simpler existence, and if so, how to keep this going after lockdown. You may be able to identify some of the things you’ve missed that you’d like to get back to, but you may well also be able to identify activities, responsibilities and commitments that you were glad to be relieved of for a few months. If so, consider how

you can build a more balanced post-lockdown life.

One possibility is that you may have enjoyed all the activities and responsibilities you had before lockdown, but it was the sheer number of them and the pressure this placed on you that was the problem. In which case, it may be harder to identify the activities you wish to drop, but it will make your life better if you can do so. Perhaps it is simply a case of scaling down the regularity of certain commitments rather than dropping them completely. Or building more space into your diary, in which you won't book anything. Or resolving to say 'no' more often when you don't feel like doing something.

Many of us already knew that we were on a treadmill in our lives. But perhaps it's taken a global pandemic to make us realise that we can get off it if we want to.

Further resources

[How to achieve less](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2013

[How to simplify life](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2012

[Slow Down!](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared 2010

The Paradox of Choice - why more is less, Barry Schwartz, Ecco, 2016

A large, mature cherry blossom tree stands in the center of a vibrant green field. The tree's branches are heavily laden with delicate pink and white blossoms, some of which have fallen to the ground, creating a thick carpet of petals around its base. In the background, rolling green hills and mountains are visible under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is a beautiful representation of spring nature.

SEVEN

Nature is
fundamental

During the strictest periods of lockdown, one of the few things we were able to leave the house for was to exercise alone (or in our household bubble) for one hour each day.

For anyone lucky enough to live near to a green, natural space, these were the places that seemed to attract us during this break in the day. For a population confined to the four walls of its homes for most of the time, the natural world was one of the things that kept us going and gave us respite, in whatever form was available to us, including gardens, parks, rivers, countryside and beaches.

People seemed to instinctively realise that nature is critical for our well-being. We should try to make this instinct more explicit - and show people how much we rely on it. We should also use this as an opportunity to remind people of the value nature has in its own right, not just as a service or recreational facility for human beings.

The crisis seems to have not only increased our appreciation of the natural world, but intensified the way we experience and relate to it.

During lockdown, the world has been quieter. People have also had more time to stop and appreciate the sights and sounds of the natural world around them.

To quote one of our supporters:

“Before Covid, I would walk or jog past nature trails, school fields and bike paths absent-mindedly. I would escape from my surroundings instead of using my surroundings to escape. Since Covid, I notice things I never have before. Things that have always been here, things that I should have noticed, or remembered, but didn't. I've seen rivers and rocks and chunks of sky, all new – new to me. I've sat in wide, open spaces so close to where I live, it's hard to think I passed them every day without giving them a second thought.”

Hopefully one enduring legacy of lockdown for many people will be a deeper appreciation of the outside world, and a recognition that we need to take time to engage with it, as well as take urgent steps to protect the natural world that we still have.

Further resources

[Natural high](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared 2010

[A bit of peace and quiet](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2009

[Modern life - as good as it gets?](#), Richard Docwra, Green Books, 2009

EIGHT

Exercise makes life better



One of the few freedoms that we retained during lockdown was the ability to leave the house for an hour of exercise every day.

As a consequence, many people took up new forms of exercise or increased levels of it during this time. Sales of bikes and running shoes shot up and people tried forms of exercise they hadn't done before.

We have known for a long time about the benefits of exercise for people's physical and mental health, but in the restricted living experience of lockdown, exercise provided even more benefits to people. It became something that helped us to manage our anxiety and feel better about ourselves. It was a way of regaining some control of our lives in a situation in which we had lost much of the control we usually have.

Also, in a time of mundanity and repetition for many people, exercise represented novelty, entertainment and a change of scene. It also represented an opportunity to get out of the house and enjoy nature and the outdoors, along with all the benefits this brings, as noted earlier.

We didn't just see an increase in more strenuous forms of exercise such as running or home workouts. Even going for a daily walk has proved to be a wonderful tonic for many people.

Exercise is one of those rare things - an irrefutable good. We hope it becomes a habit that people embed

in their lives as the lockdown eases.

For many people, keeping up their lockdown levels of exercise will be easy, as it will simply be something they enjoy and want to continue. But if you are struggling to maintain your motivation with it, don't worry. Take an alternative approach - keep it as a habit in your life - something you make time and space for regularly during the week. Then, as venues reopen and the choice of exercise expands, try out some different ways of filling these 'exercise slots' in your week.

Try to find the type exercise that suits you - and for most of us, there will be at least one! Make it fun, by using it as an opportunity to meet up and socialise with people, to see new places or play games. And remember how good it feels, both to be doing exercise and to have just done it.

Further resources

[How to eat and exercise well](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2017

[How to get active](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2011

NINE

It feels good
to help



One of the most positive and heart-warming aspects of the pandemic has been the outpouring of help, solidarity and compassion that has come from the public.

Just one example of this is the level of volunteering during this time. In March 2020, the NHS launched an appeal for 250,000 volunteers to support it during the Covid-19 crisis. Just one day after its initial announcement, 170,000 people had signed up, and by the end of the month, 750,000 people had applied, meaning the scheme had to be paused due to the overwhelming number of applications.

The number of people who have volunteered or helped out in some way beyond this runs to several million, and provides proof that people come together in a crisis.

The pandemic also showed that they do this because of a simple urge to help out. We want to help others, but it also feels good to do so, and gives us a sense of purpose, particularly in a crisis. It feels good to contribute.

Here is a quote from one of our supporters:

“As a public servant, I have long valued helping people. I have spent a good deal of lockdown helping deliver food and other services to the vulnerable. It’s been great and I’d like to do more rather than return to my ‘normal’ job.”

It feels particularly good to help other people when

you know there are other people doing the same. This sense of belonging to a wider group or movement of people stepping up to be of service to others feels great individually, but also as a country felt like a wave of unity had overtaken us, which was an incredibly powerful feeling. How can we retain this spirit of unity and help?

A good starting point is to continue helping people whenever we can and to make 'being of service' a priority in our lives.

We live in a highly individualistic culture in the west, in which our own needs as individuals are put before those of the group. In other cultures the group comes first. Perhaps there is a middle ground here in which we find the most meaning not just by living for ourselves, but by also being of service to other people when they need it. This would require us to be more aware of when other people are in need, and to be willing to be more flexible with our routines and daily priorities in order to help them.

This is quite a different approach to life and we'd need to adapt to it, but it could be very satisfying and meaningful. It could also connect us more with people and free us from the trap of the oppressive routines and schedules that many of us are focussed on in our daily lives.

Further resources

[How to make the world better](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2010

TEN

Human beings are
great - but need
support to flourish

The Covid-19 crisis has laid human beings bare in all their messy, complicated, contradictory glory.

For those of us with an interest in psychology and human behaviour it has provided a fascinating illustration of the fact that we are simply animals with particular traits of thinking and behaviour.

We have seen both the best and the worst of people.

We have seen acts of great kindness, sacrifice and solidarity - including the millions of volunteers who helped their community in big and small ways, collective and unifying group behaviour such as 'clapping for carers' and the simple fact that so many people followed the lockdown guidance and restrictions, in order to protect both themselves and others.

In contrast we have also seen acts of selfishness and anti-social behaviour, including people who have coughed or spat at others, disrupted the work of nurses or exploited the vulnerabilities of people in this difficult time.

We have also seen the dynamics of how people form beliefs and interpret information. How conspiracy theories can form about vaccination programmes and the safety of medication, and how communications and group dynamics can trigger panic buying and shortages of goods on the shelves of supermarkets.

Although we seem to be coming out of the other side of the crisis thanks to human ingenuity, sacrifice and co-

operation, we should also see this period as a reality check - that the ice of civilisation that we skate on in the modern world is quite thin - and we shouldn't take it for granted.

We should therefore celebrate the positive behaviour we have seen from human beings, and use the negative behaviours not simply as an opportunity to judge and condemn the protagonists, but as a chance to understand human beings better. Because the picture most people have in their minds of what human beings are like is completely wrong. We tend to think that we behave in deliberate, rational ways, our actions driven by conclusions that we've reached for ourselves through rational, calculated thinking.

But the latest research in psychology, neuroscience and other disciplines is unearthing a different picture - that much of our thinking is instinctive rather than rational, and that we are prone to a range of cognitive biases.

We need to make sure more people understand and appreciate this new, more realistic view of human beings - both so that we can each be more aware of our own behaviour and tendencies and account for it in our lives, and also because the implications of these insights for society are profound. Our behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic provides a telling illustration of this.

We need to build a society around this new picture

of human beings - one which recognises our characteristics as creatures, and support us to thrive and live harmoniously given our traits. This would be a society whose processes, culture and institutions support us to be the social, co-operative creatures that we are, but also help to balance out and guide us away from the behavioural traits, biases and vulnerabilities that we also have, which can lead us to negatively affect others and the wider world.

Further resources

[The Life Trap](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2018

[Life - and how to think about it](#), Richard Docwra, Big Idea Books, 2021

ELEVEN

Technology can
make the world
better

If the Covid-19 crisis had happened even 20 years ago, the world and our lives may well have shuddered to a halt. It is difficult to see how we would have kept some of our most vital services and lifelines going without the help of technology that has emerged and become commonplace in the last couple of decades.

At the centre of many of our lifestyle changes has been the internet. In 1995, there were only 16 million internet users around the world. Now there are around 3 billion.

The impact of this technology spreads across many key areas of our lives. Take food as the first example. Tesco and Asda dabbled with home shopping via computer as early as the 1980s but there was very little customer base to make this worthwhile. But in 2020 at the time of Covid-19 this sector had been transformed, with online shopping and delivery services becoming a lifeline for so many vulnerable and self-isolating people.

Amazon was only established in 1995, and at that point primarily as a bookseller. Although it is now criticised for its business practices, shopping from Amazon and other online retailers has been the only way many people have been able to buy goods over the lockdown period.

We are fortunate that these online shopping operations had reached scale before the Covid-19 crisis hit - otherwise they simply may not have been

able to handle the sudden increase in demand placed on them.

Another area in which technology has enabled us to keep going is in the workplace - or rather, away from the workplace. Internet, email and work management technology has been available to us for a couple of decades, but the availability of online video calling services has been the real game-changer in workplaces, allowing people to have meetings as close to 'face to face' as possible without travelling and meeting.

This video calling technology is a relatively recent invention, certainly for mass usage, which wouldn't have been available to us even 5 years before lockdown. The use of Zoom's online video calling service increased 30-fold in April 2020, just after lockdown began and people started having to work and live at home.

These communication technologies have also enabled us to stay connected and see each other in our personal lives. The importance of this for our well-being and ability to bear the strains of lockdown should not be underestimated.

This reliance on technology during this period has brought some unexpected advantages. It has given some older people and less regular users of technology a chance to get more acquainted and comfortable with it, which could significantly improve their ongoing

wellbeing after lockdown.

The ability to hold remote meetings cheaply and easily has also led many companies to rethink their working arrangements, which could result in more flexibility for workers, and could result in a reduction in the environmental impact of business travel, as the need for in-person meetings could fall.

Even the development of the vaccines themselves has been assisted by recent technological progress. For example, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines were developed using “platform technologies” that involve slotting genetic material from the virus into a tried and tested delivery package. The mRNA vaccine platform technology used to develop the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine had been in development for over two decades. Improvements in data-recording and the advent of social media has made it quicker and easier to recruit trial participants.

The overarching conclusion of all these points is that we should perhaps pause to feel some gratitude for the technological developments that have enabled us to stay afloat and come out of this crisis faster than we might otherwise have done.

Technological innovation can of course be both a positive and negative thing, and can often be used for frivolous or destructive reasons. There is often well-founded fear, caution and suspicion about the advent of new technologies and the impact they will

have on our lives and our world. But it is refreshing to have an occasion to celebrate rather than fear or condemn it - and to remember the enormous value that technological development can have for human beings when it is used for the benefit of people and the planet.

We also need to ensure that we keep hold of the benefits that technology has promised us during lockdown - from the potential for more flexible working to reduced air travel and environmental impact. It is up to each of us to lobby our employers and politicians for these changes to be made permanent.

TWELVE

We can change how we work



One of the most enduring effects of lockdown is likely to be its impact on how we work in the future.

By forcing most of us to confine our working lives to the home it has opened up the realisation that we don't need to work in the traditional ways we've become accustomed to. It has also forced a physical transformation - to make these new ways of working happen in a short space of time. This has brought a change both in attitudes towards work, and working practices.

Even before lockdown, there had been a growing demand for greater flexibility of working for people - particularly those with office jobs - as many people argued that technology was making old methods of working redundant - such as being in the office every day, or travelling in person to every meeting.

Enlightened employers had accepted this and adapted to it, as part of making their workplaces both more productive and better places to work for their employees. But many had not.

During lockdown, a wide range of organisations had to change their working practices, allow people to work from home and conduct meetings remotely, and invest in the equipment and training needed to make this happen.

Even organisations that had previously insisted that they couldn't operate if people worked from home have managed to do so. Lockdown has therefore blown

the ‘you must be in the office’ argument out of the water for many employees. It has also resulted in a new working setup for many people, who are now equipped to work from home.

At this stage it is unclear how exactly working life will look once lockdown has ended and people have settled back into new routines. But even if it is a mix of the old office-based and new home-based ways, we hope the experience of lockdown will lead to a lasting transformation in attitudes to how we work.

We should all be lobbying our employees to ensure that as many people as possible have a more flexible balance of work and home life. There’s no reason why employers can’t give most of us more flexibility in how, when and where we work. And this could have many benefits, both for us, them and the environment.

For example, it could save commuters a lot of the time and money they spend each day on pointless travel and dedicate these to things that give them more meaning and pleasure. It could make workers more productive as they are refreshed and ready to work in the way that’s most effective for them. And it could save the environmental impact of millions of unnecessary car and plane journeys to workplaces and for meetings.



THIRTEEN

We must address
inequality - and our
aspirations

Disasters tend to have the most impact on the poorest people in society, and Covid-19 has been no exception. Although the crisis brought financial concerns for many people, those at the lower end of the income chart lacked the means to ride out the storm, and the pandemic brought a further layer of crisis to these people.

A report by Child Poverty Action Group in December 2020 showed that “as a result of the pandemic, nearly six in 10 families said they were struggling to cover the cost of three or more basic essentials, including food, utilities, rent, travel or child-related costs. Around half of all families said they had a new or worse debt problem.”

The pandemic showed how we must deal with poverty and inequality as a matter of the utmost urgency. Even outside the pandemic, poverty can lead people and families into lives of perpetual crisis, and has a devastating effect on their lives and opportunities.

The Covid-19 crisis reminds us yet again of the countless reasons why we should fight for a more equal society and ensure everyone has a good standard of living. Not just because it causes great suffering or because the existence of poverty is a moral outrage in a rich society, but also because everyone in a society benefits when it is more equal.

Whilst lockdown has exposed the gap between those with more and those with less, it has also shown that

we are very similar when it comes to the fundamental ways we live and the fundamental things we need. It therefore also gives those of us who are lucky to be financially secure a lesson about aspiration.

We spend lots of time comparing ourselves with other people or yearning for what they have, often feeling bad about ourselves as a result.

But during lockdown we have had more chances to see into the lives of the rich and famous via Zoom calls from their homes on chat shows or other broadcasts. And this has demystified their lives a little. Although their houses may be larger and furnishings more expensive, the essential elements of their lives are the same as ours. They eat the same food, have similar routines, face similar challenges in their personal lives and have similar needs. This should be a useful lesson to us.

When we aspire to be other people or have what they have, we are often only looking at them in a very superficial way, imagining that having more money, being famous or being surrounded by more stuff will make life fundamentally different from how it is now.

But our greater exposure to other peoples' lives in lockdown shows that the actual life, routine and worldview you would have if you became famous and wealthy is going to be very similar to what you have now. So, perhaps it's better to be happy with what we've got and to focus more on building the non-

material side of our lives (including our experiences, learning, engagement with others etc.), as this is how we can make changes that will actually change our experience of life.

Further resources

The Spirit Level by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, Penguin, 2010

[Your life is enough](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2016



FOURTEEN

People need people

During the Covid-19 crisis we have experienced concern about the health of our loved ones, financial worries, restricted freedoms and anxiety about the future. But perhaps the thing that has been hardest to bear for many people has been social isolation - not being able to see, and be in the company of, other people.

The tragic irony of Covid-19 is that it is our desire for human contact and proximity that helps to spread it, but this contact is the thing we seem to miss the most when we are forced into lockdown.

There are several kinds of social contact we have missed out on during lockdown. The most obvious is the ability to see the family members and close friends that we love. It's not just celebrations and special occasions with these people that we have missed out on - it's those times of 'popping round for a cup of tea' just to catch up that we now realise are the glue that binds our lives together and gives us love, reassurance and meaning.

It's not only the ability to see other people in the flesh of course - we have also felt the loss of physical contact. For some people, a simple hug with a family member or close friend is the first thing they would wish to do once lockdown has been sufficiently eased.

Our need for social contact extends way beyond those closest to us. It's about chatting with the neighbours, meeting friends in the pub, being part of a crowd at

a gig, or sitting in a cafe alone but surrounded by other people going about their lives. It's about being a physical part of a community of people, and feeling at ease with this. It may well take some time before we all feel comfortable again being part of this as before.

But eventually we will, as the need for social interaction is an instinct that runs through us as creatures, and to be deprived of it is a great hardship to bear. It will be a source of great joy to get back to our usual social interactions once lockdown has ended.

And perhaps we should use our experience of lockdown as a reminder to give priority to relationships in our lives, and to keeping in touch with those we care about. As these are often the things we miss most when they're not around.

Further resources

[How to connect](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2012

[How to be alone \(and not lonely\)](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2015

FIFTEEN

We know what
really matters
in life

Many of the things that give us meaning in life are actually quite simple and sitting right in front of our eyes - for example, human relationships. In ordinary circumstances though, we can often find ourselves unable to see these things, and can find ourselves wandering through life struggling to find a sense of meaning whilst doing things we don't really find fulfilling.

One reason why people might ordinarily struggle to find meaning in their lives is that there are so many distractions and possible sources of meaning in the modern world. We are always busy, with our attention distracted by novelty, other commitments or the next thing we have to do. There are also some very strong social, cultural and commercial influences encouraging us to seek meaning in certain things that don't actually bring much meaning for most people, such as wealth or material consumption.

But lockdown has resulted in a whole swathe of these options being taken away from us, including some of the things that actually did give us meaning, as well as lots of the things that didn't, but which distracted us from seeing or doing the things that really did.

For many people, this has meant that lockdown has cleared their vision, and made them more aware of what really matters to them in life. These include the things they couldn't do or have that they particularly missed, or things they did have that really helped them through. For example, from my own perspective,

some things I have missed enormously during the lockdown period are social contact, travel and adventure. Things I have worried about include my family and friends. And things that have brought me pleasure and fulfilment during this difficult time, include being out in nature and exercising.

This doesn't mean that all I'll be doing after lockdown is seeing my family and friends, travelling and exercising in nature (although that doesn't sound at all bad) - but it does mean that, as the other options and pressures re-enter my life as lockdown eases, I'm going to make sure that I prioritise some of these things in my life from now on.

So, let's use this situation in which we have a greater focus on what matters to us to consider how we can prioritise these things more in our lives as we emerge from lockdown. Let's use this opportunity to do some life editing - increasing the nourishing things and reducing the less important stuff.

Further resources

[How to find meaning](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2021

[The modern life survival guide](#), Richard Docwra, Life Squared, 2014

Lessons from lockdown

Our lives have been turned upside down by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It's time to reflect on what's happened, how to move forward and what we can learn to make our lives and world better.

This guide explores how each of us can exit lockdown in a way that feels comfortable, and provides 15 lessons we can learn from this whole experience to help us improve our own lives and the society around us.