

# COPING WITH COVID

During my work throughout 2020, primarily as a trauma therapist working online, I made a number of observations about how we – humans in the UK – are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Working and living in isolation for several months clearly creates new habits; when the first national lockdown ended, I wondered how people might cope with getting back outside and knew many wouldn't recognise acrophobia symptoms because of the current context.

I come from the Westcountry, and with friends and parents in the countryside over 70 but now being based in a city myself, I was aware many people in the countryside feared an influx of city dwellers spreading the virus to vulnerable communities. I was naturally curious and critical of public communications and rules that pitted people against each other potentially setting up boundaries between communities.

## Pressure and release

My work as a therapist meant I spoke to people in both the city and country (online) throughout lockdown and recognised some patterns that were forming with my colleagues.

Although people needed more connection spiritually, there was often less motivation for connecting. Financial pressure and different deals being given out promoted envy and competition. Where the initial, natural human response had been very generous, supportive and community-oriented, there was the danger this could be damaged as fatigue set in and people spent more time apart. Social media and news channels can stoke this fear; there had been some good communications from the World Health Organisation early on suggesting people limit the amount of news they watch, and to manage their social media time to protect their mental health. I often remind my clients that everyone has struggles; these are not usually on display so comparison with facades and imagined lives can compound feelings of isolation and lack of self-worth, making it harder to share concerns and connect.

As lockdown eased, I thought about ways to help encourage people to navigate the new social and economic terrain. Unfortunately, further local lockdowns seem to be exasperating many problems. The not knowing, not being able to plan one day to the next; maybe fearing reconnection – in case it will be to cut off again – can be disempowering and make it hard to look toward the future.

## Some coping strategies

Working with a five-hour and five-year perspective seems helpful. To connect with people and be present with them, as well as with everyday tasks, and think about the broader direction of life and work; rather than getting dragged along the tideline by waves of news and rumours.

There is a quote, 'any task that you can do without thinking too hard about it, has the potential to make you feel good. Treat it as a meditation, connecting wholly to the moment and you can be more fulfilled'. I have no idea where I found that, but I like it!

Focusing on one thing, gardening, cooking, running, yoga; whatever it is can give relief to rumination on wider world problems. Ring-fencing time to think about finances independently can also be helpful, proactively focusing for a timed slot of say 90 minutes, as opposed to trying to ignore a growing fear. This can also be applied to brainstorming new business ideas and areas you'd like to train in.

As well as thinking about what needs to be done, it can be helpful also to allow space to think about what has been achieved – a 'Done list' – no matter how big or small. A phone call with an old friend, cleaning and decluttering the house, applying for funding or a bounce-back loan, getting out when possible for a climb, boulder or walk.

Anything can go on a 'done list'; for one it might be eating a decent meal, for another it might be accessing furlough payments for their staff.

Here are some questions you might like to give a little thought to and note a response:

*Is there one thing you can do over the next week to help take compassionate care of yourself?*

*What one thing might do over the next week to support yourself with regards to working in isolation?*

*Can you think of one reason why you have chosen the path that you have, or that you like about it?*

*Think of one thing that you are good at in your work, can you visualise yourself doing this, past and/or future?*

Some of my work over lockdown has included online group sessions on working in isolation and focus. I am sure that working from a place of compassion, where people are gentle with themselves is more effective than working from fear, which can be crippling. Without the release and camaraderie of climbing communities that many of us usually access, it seems essential to put some systems in place as winter approaches. This can include small things like decisively building new habits within the space that we have (a stretch or short walk each morning or lunchtime, getting dressed before opening the laptop, planning meals) and recognising the formation of destructive



MAIN PAINTING *Sea Turtle by day*, mixed media on aluminium, 46x61cm, L. A. Simmons 2020. ABOVE *City Lovers* mixed media on aluminium, 30x40cm, 2019.

ones, such as becoming nocturnal, losing touch with loved ones, alcohol and drug use, over and under-eating.

Thinking of yourself as you might a friend or colleague can be effective for if you are feeling low, if they were in your situation what might they do, or what might you say to support them?

These are not easy times, it is natural to feel confused, angry, low or anti-social, for it to be harder to reach out and to take it more personally when the people you try to connect with are less responsive than usual.

It can help to write a few lines summarising what you did each day, to look back over as time merges, to break tasks down and lower your expectations, to understand if you feel lethargic or panicked. The unresponsive friend/colleague or family member might also be feeling this way.

## Grief and resilience

There has been a lot of loss this year, of the activities we love, deaths, communities and with loss comes mourning. Grief can be complicated, it can make one feel mad, the bargaining (if I do this, he/she will come back, it will be OK) denial (it's not real) the anger can also feel unusual and frightening. Without the release of climbing, group activities and self-worth from the job and friends it might be the right time to speak to a professional from another field.

This may appear to be a "plug", but it is a fact that just one or two meetings with a therapist can provide great relief; to know that what you are feeling is natural and with the exception of hurting yourself or another there is no wrong way to mourn. Discussing your feelings in confidence can also make it easier to then share them with friends and family.

Early in lockdown I made some recordings for people who were anxious: [www.socialarttherapy.com/blog/sound-files-for-between-sessions](http://www.socialarttherapy.com/blog/sound-files-for-between-sessions). They are flexible meditations and thought processes that can be adapted on a case-by-case basis.

In the next edition of this magazine I would like to share with you some ideas that I've tried and tested using adventure as a medium for therapy, including practical applications of some of the issues explored above. ■



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Art practice: [www.LASimmons.com](http://www.LASimmons.com)  
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