



Locked down, but not out

WORDS

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FEATURE



Jude Adcock argues that we are living in and witnessing the advent of a new therapeutic era

I can't help but be drawn to pictures of COVID-19; a sphere with peplomers or sucker-like spikey protrusions that appear to reach out. I suspect this is because I find their aesthetic curiously attractive; but also because they represent a rather paradoxical metaphoric image for how the counselling and psychotherapy profession may have experienced the past 20 weeks (at the time of writing) in socially, or as I prefer to think of it, physically, distanced lockdown. Therapists across the UK, almost overnight, becoming singular entities (the singular sphere), no longer working in the room in groups, in supervision or with clients in real spaces. Instead, having to not only navigate new ways of working but also to find ways to reach out (the peplomers) and connect to others.

And so, as the virus relies on attaching itself to a receptor on a host cell for its survival, I realise that I too have had to reach out and make connections to ensure I not only survive but thrive throughout this strangest of times. What a curious journey it has been, even for a self-professed introvert like me, who, while writing up my thesis a couple of years ago, quite comfortably embodied Gollum, aided by a jar of Nutella as 'my precious'. I prided myself on being a prime candidate for doing lockdown well. One thing I've taken on board over the past 140 or so days is: never assume anything!

Connectivity

It is widely recognised that we are socially driven as a species. This is evidenced from our earliest need for affect attunement,¹ the development of our attachment style,² and, not least, the often treacherous path through adolescence into the realm of adulthood. It's therefore logical that the more successful our interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, the better off we will be.

Adler talked extensively about this need to connect as 'Gemeinschaftsgefühl' – the nearest translation being 'community feeling', better known as 'social interest'.³ Conceptualised as having an active interest in the welfare of humankind, our social interest not only identifies but empathises with others.⁴ As the key tenet of Adlerian psychology, social interest is explored in therapy as a predictor for an individual's good psychological health. We need a sense of community and connection; we need to feel we have a place in the world, found through our co-operation with, and interest in, others.⁵

It seems to me that like no other time in recent history, there has been a strong need for community feeling. An image of my neighbours on a Thursday evening comes to mind, joined in thanks for the NHS (and the many other people and services that have kept us going). People who live near me, many of whom I have never seen before, have all come together with a mutuality of purpose. Not least in the forming of a neighbourhood WhatsApp group, bringing the sharing of help, support and vegetables.

The ways in which people have managed to unite during the pandemic is testament to this intrinsic need to connect – something I think we can certainly take for granted during more 'normal' times. For me, witnessing people's creativity has been a true privilege. It was heart-warming to see an NHS doctor and her violinist husband serenading their neighbours with beautiful music in Stockwell on Easter Sunday. And courageous young Tony, a five-year-old boy whose legs had been amputated as a five-week-old baby, due to horrific abuse at the hands of his parents, walking 10km during June on his crutches, raising £145,000 for the Evelina London Children's Hospital. He had been inspired by the efforts of the Second World War veteran

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Captain Sir Tom Moore, who raised an incredible £33 million for the NHS as he was approaching his centenary birthday and was knighted for his contribution. Witnessing the coming together of nations during a recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter campaign has been a truly sobering affair, which commands an article of its own.

However, some of us, myself included, are naturally more insular, shy perhaps, or just happiest in our own company, but not, I hasten to add, without any social interest. While the nation appeared to be gripped in confusion, turmoil and grief, I, rather ashamedly at first, admitted to enjoying

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the change; no longer rushing around fulfilling my various commitments. And no sitting in congested traffic. I felt as if I had been given permission to breathe and slow down. I even watched the whole 10 episodes of *Sewing Bee* for the first time – ever. I can't remember the last time I had permissible *time*. And yes – I am now reminding myself of ethical principle 5.6 of the *Ethical Framework*⁶

Having known myself as an introverted and rather socially awkward only child (thankfully I'm comfortable one-to-one), what has surprised me most on a personal level is that I have enjoyed a new-found sense of community. This period in lockdown has reignited in me some philosophical explorations of what it means to exist. I can't help but consider how much of my life is often spent living in what Sartre⁷ terms 'bad faith'. Paradoxical because, during this period of lockdown, when one could argue pressure to manage living has been at its most acute, I have reflected on how willingly I have previously lived rather inauthentically by disowning my innate sense of freedom; instead caught up in meaningless triviality resplendent in much of the modern-day zeitgeist. I can only speak for myself, but my sense is that some clients join me in this paradoxical situation.

Rising to the challenge

'When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves'⁸

I'm a bit old fashioned at heart, and while I recognise technology has many uses and advantages, I also acknowledge some resistance. The idea of working online full time would certainly have sent a shudder down my spine. Albeit in a different context,

phenomenologist van Manen⁹ talks of traversing a world that is not our own. This idea resonates with my experience of working online during lockdown; feeling as if I had left a well-known world, comfortable and predictable insofar as work organisation and expectations were concerned, and leapt into a chasm of unknowns. In a nutshell, I had to 'tech-up' – and quickly.

Apart from a couple of clients, for whom working online/telephone would prove impossible, I was faced with clients appearing to assume that I would simply continue seamlessly online, and I felt I had to at least appear unphased and competent in this task. As I write, I recognise familiar feelings; that I have arrived here, at this moment in time, yet unsure quite how. As if teleported into a new and unfamiliar dimension without being mistress of my own destiny – which, of course, to some extent, is true. I find myself questioning if I have reverted to my historic default of being a 'good girl', in other words putting up and shutting up, or if I am a passive pillion rider, attaching to whichever unsuspecting Ducati V4S rider I happen upon next (imagine that – a pillion attached to a Ducati – I've just realised how insane, but exciting, that might be).

As a mode of communication, the telephone has never appealed to me, other than for purely perfunctory reasons, and most brief communication can now be done by text or WhatsApp. I think it's because I don't like the idea of intruding uninvited on people's lives and find it more difficult to engage when I can't see a face. But, in fact, as I have been trying to accommodate all my clients' needs, I have had to get used to the telephone and it's been surprisingly OK; the calls are also pre-planned. Another thing I

have learnt during the past four months or so, is that being flexible (or rather being willing to be flexible) is really rather useful.

Yet another change that has occurred is beginning to work therapeutically outside. I realise I may be a bit late to the party. I have started, for a few existing clients, 'walk and talk' therapy. I am fortunate to live on the edge of the Fens in East Anglia. It is flat, which means I don't risk the embarrassment of huffing and puffing up a hill, while the views and skies can be incredibly beautiful. It feels quite different, but there is a natural rhythm that comes from experiencing nature, and something about being alongside rather than face to face that feels very comfortable.

Ecopsychology encourages therapists to look beyond an individual's internal landscape by exploring their relationship and interactions with the natural landscape.⁹ This idea sits well with me. One thing that does play on my mind a little is the prospect of offering 'walk and talk' to new, and I feel sad to say, more specifically, male clients, although in reality is this any riskier than being alone in my counselling room? There is a balance it seems from being discreet enough for my client yet comfortable enough to be able to escape. Best I keep going on the treadmill. Whichever way it's done, in essence, I feel very fortunate to have been able to keep working; to meet not only my clients' and supervisees' needs, but to also maintain my own sense of purpose and, quite frankly, sanity.

Testing times

While BACP was quick to respond to our needs, giving guidance and regular updates on how best to proceed in these new and unprecedented times, many colleagues I've spoken to have felt juxtaposed between meeting the needs of their family while remaining steadfast and available to their clients. Therapists have suddenly found themselves having to navigate a new terrain of uncertainty and arising questions, such as, 'Is it possible to work at relational depth online?'¹¹

Irrespective of how well we have adapted to new ways of working, parenting or socialising, for many in the profession, the ramifications have been huge, requiring a lot of plate spinning, resourcefulness and steely determination. It's been particularly tricky for those whose children would usually be in

school and who have had to juggle childcare with client work, and for those whose main work is not from their own premises.

There have also been many losses. I wish here to remember those who have lost their life to this terrible disease and the pain relatives and friends have experienced at not being able to be there supporting their loved ones. Also, to those for whom lockdown has brought great suffering. For many, particularly the elderly and those living with disability, it has often meant further isolation. Others have suffered from an increase in domestic violence and child abuse, while families have been unable to be together at times of need.¹² Many, held within institutions, such as care homes for the elderly, psychiatric hospitals and prisons, have been denied the opportunity for visitors, while children and young people in care homes have been unable to access activities that help them cope with life. A supervisee of mine who lives with disability notably remarked passing their 100th day in isolation. In spite of the tangible hardships faced, he was still able to tell me of his gratitude in witnessing the sun setting.

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CPDitis

Sounds like a curious affliction don't you think? For some of us, it has been. One of impulsivity and sheer panic. It is a term I heard coined by a participant at an online training I attended. I should add, my attendance at yet another event in a long list of free or low-cost training available during the last few months. Initially, I was excited to find some training courses that felt relevant to my particular areas of interest. It went well. To begin with. Over a period of a few weeks, I

noticed myself searching obsessively for courses, checking dates in my diary, and, I feel embarrassed to admit, moving a client to accommodate a one-hour training event which, of course, my career depended upon. As I sat down to start yet another session, squeezed like a lemon into hot water, I realised I had created a self-perpetuating cycle of anxiety and had begun to drive myself quite literally mad. The most ridiculous part of it all – I had severely impeded my already limited capacity to retain information by allowing no time to process anything useful that I might have learned from said training courses. Crazy, huh?

I'm hoping some of you will empathise with me, even breathe a sigh of relief as you realise you were not alone. Well, perhaps not, but I feel lighter for confessing my crime to a typically sane (enough) group of people who may also have gone slightly nutty during recent times. While I'm extremely grateful to all the people who have been involved in facilitating some truly wonderful and often very community-spirited events, I, for one, am looking forward to relinquishing what I can only describe as my 'fear of missing out' for the more typically rational and purposeful choices I make when it comes to CPD activities.

Inhabiting the uninhibition

I like to think of my therapist self as professional, tidy enough in my appearance, and clean. When working in person, I find myself challenged by the occasional – how can I put this politely? – client with a rather effusively unpleasant odour or strong smell of tobacco (I'm an annoyingly judgmental ex-smoker of nine years). Some might wince when I say I don't believe we can be non-judgmental. We all make judgments, we need to – to survive. However, in the true Rogerian sense of being non-judgmental, we avoid imposing our values onto another, as this may appear oppressive and hostile.¹³

While a strict interpretation of the expression 'non-judgmental' potentially risks therapy occurring in a spiritual and emotional vacuum,¹³ a strange phenomenon has crept into my working world – the truly uninhibited clients I refer to: the clients who greet me from their bedrooms, sometimes lying across the bed in their pyjamas; the clients who drink a glass of wine or smoke a cigarette while talking to me about their sex life. Perhaps I

should check my services page! One young client got up from the chair in their room to show me a picture on the wall and let out a rather cacophonous fart. Fortunately they laughed, which enabled me to also let go... and no, not in the same way! It has been most peculiar being invited into such personal spaces and I have, on occasion, found it hard not to judge the wallpaper.

Back to the future

While Sussman writes about this profession as a 'curious calling'¹⁴ and Adams discusses the 'myth of the untroubled therapist',¹⁵ I envisage another title appearing on the shelf, in which working as a therapist during a pandemic is reflected upon, digested and explicated. I feel confident in asserting that we are living in and witnessing the advent of a new therapeutic era. What this might look like to us, as therapists, supervisors, trainers, our clients and the profession as a whole, remains to be seen. It feels to me both daunting and exciting; although I can't help wondering if it will 'just happen' around me or if this experience invites me to be less of a pillion rider and more of a Ducati driver. I wonder how it's been for each of you? Make it what you wish as a final metaphor comes to mind – out of the ashes the phoenix doth arise. ●

YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

If you have a response to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter or respond with an article of your own. Email: privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk

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