

‘AM I GIVING YOU WHAT YOU NEED?’

As the world struggles to cope with the Covid pandemic, UK therapists say people are taking the chance to reassess relationships and make positive changes. **by LOUISE CHUNN**

The UK is the sick man of Europe: more people have died here (75,000 by early January) than in any European country except Italy, and the death rate of 112 per 100,000 is exceeded only by a handful of our continental neighbours: Belgium, Italy and San Marino.

Covid affects everything you do and can't do, everyone you see and can't see. The new, more virulent strain that has taken hold in the past few weeks meant families were kept apart over Christmas, with pubs and restaurants closed and town centres deserted.

There is mass anxiety. Not just if I get it, will I die, but will my job survive, will I ever see my grandchildren again, what about my dream of university life, my holiday in the South of France, my baby due in March, my big fat wedding plans? Everything is affected, everything is unsure.

For 80% of young people with existing mental-health issues, the pandemic has worsened their situation, with the loneliness and isolation of the various lockdowns exacerbating things. University students are struggling with anxiety, authorities report, along with their worried parents. The number of young mothers reporting post-natal depression – everything from sadness to suicidal thoughts – has nearly tripled in lockdown from an estimated 15% to 41%, and a November report from the Duke and Duchess

of Cambridge's Royal Foundation said that 63% of parents of under-fives experienced loneliness, compared with 38% before the pandemic.

At the other end of the life cycle, not only have elderly people died in much higher numbers, but the over-seventies, who are shielded, have also had to cope without families around them. According to Age UK, many have experienced a decline in cognitive function, physical confidence and mobility and an increase in levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness and well-being.

‘THE COVID EFFECT’

Initially, people were too shocked for action: as one psychologist friend said to me, “It's Maslow's hierarchy of needs writ large – make sure you have

shelter, food, pasta, toilet paper.” But after a month, the therapists started to see “the Covid effect”. So, what are they hearing, who are they seeing, and how is therapy even being practised in a pandemic?

Charlotte Fox Weber, who set up the School of Life therapy service in London, says, “I'm seeing a lot of boredom and disconnect, a lack of interest and curiosity. It's a

subtle problem, an existential struggle. This lack of freedom and choice relates to death anxiety. I've been quite concerned with a couple of clients.

“There's a hopelessness around, a feeling that you are not allowed to be excited or optimistic. We've become suspicious of excitement, almost clinging to the boredom because it's safer.”

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GETTY IMAGES

THERAPY BY ZOOM

When the pandemic hit, therapists were rocked. How could they work safely in a small consulting room? Would clients agree to sessions that weren't face-to-face? Relatively few were already offering online therapy, and there was professional antipathy to it as an effective treatment. How that has changed. Within weeks, tens of thousands of therapy professionals had moved to Zoom or some other video service and – mostly without extra training – were delivering their services straight into people's homes.

London therapist David Weale was typical, reporting that being seen in their own homes had a positive, disinhibiting effect on many clients. "I was quite sceptical before I started, but it really worked. Being comfortable seems to speed up where they are prepared to go in the session, especially about quite intimate things. I wouldn't have predicted that."

Most therapists are now comfortable with providing Zoom therapy and, according to a recent survey, are unlikely to return to working mostly in person. Some, like psychotherapist Aaron Balick, are less convinced: "I really miss seeing my clients in real life – I find the work more fulfilling when in my office. For me, it feels like second best. Therapists like the convenience now – they can be more flexible, don't have to commute to offices – but many clients want to come back to the room."

Also, not everyone has a home where they can be confident of not being overheard, or they may not want their family or friends to know they are having therapy.



London therapist David Weale.

Interestingly, most therapists I spoke to said sessions are not filled with people terrified of catching the virus. Actually, some of those with existing health anxiety have felt validated, almost relieved by the situation – "Now others see the world the way I do." As Aaron Balick, a well-known therapist and author who set up central London therapy networking service Stillpoint Spaces, says, "In a pandemic, it's as if we all have health anxiety, we all have obsessive-compulsive disorder [OCD]. It's the norm to wash your hands and worry about catching the virus."

Balick feels that what most of his clients are struggling with is the relentless uncertainty. "It feels to them that the world is off its axis," he says. "They're worried about jobs, family, parents' health, what is going to happen in the world. It's existential. And until November, they were also incredibly anxious about the US election."

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Donald Trump anxiety has been replaced by clients raising frustration about a UK Government led by a Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who dreams of being the freedom-loving Cavalier, but has ended up having to toe the hard Roundhead line.

DRINKING PROBLEMS

Some clients are continuing to work through whatever brought them to therapy before the pandemic, but new clients are finding anxiety and depression overwhelming. Everyone mentions the drinking, though that isn't just a problem for those who have a problem with drinking. Everyone is drinking too much, every day, starting earlier and earlier. At first, it was a "fun" lockdown activity; now people see it as another problem. Says Fox Weber: "We look to fill the void and distract ourselves from ourselves with instant gratification."

Any former patterns of disordered eating are often being triggered, and as Fox Weber says, "Comfort eating is so tempting. They may want to improve their eating habits during this time, but the listlessness, the boredom, the lack of planned events can be totally demotivating." So eat, drink and fill up with self-loathing has become the order of the day.



Although columnists wondered whether there would be either a baby boom or a rash of divorces post-pandemic, it turns out people are happy to talk: couples counselling has become wildly popular. There are two ways of looking at that, says Dawn Kaffel, a London couples counsellor. "A lot of couples have benefited from this time of lockdown; it's been an opportunity for couples to come to counselling and spend time together in a way they never had before. They can reflect a lot on what's missing, what they have yearned for – all things that were taken for granted in a normal family situation."

And the other side of the story? "For clients who have been in therapy a long time, this added extra stress has been extremely difficult to navigate," she says, looking rather grim. It's the parents of school-age children she feels most for. "The issue of boundaries comes up again and again. Couples in the same space, working continuously, and then it's straight on to dinner on the same table. There's no individual space, physically or emotionally. Everyone is suffering."

TAKE TIME OFF SOCIAL MEDIA

How you live with the pandemic depends on where you reside. The nations that make up the UK – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – have different levels of autonomy and so set their own rules about what can and can't be done.

Audra McKellar is a counsellor who works in both Sale, in Greater Manchester, and Wilmslow, in Cheshire (renowned for its appeal to Premier League footballers and their glamorous wives from across the



North West), an area with a high infection rate. She feels that in spite of that, clients are coping well, with some interesting new additions. “Previously, I’ve mostly had ladies, but during Covid, I have seen a lot of men – working professionals – who wanted to use the opportunity to address things that hadn’t been addressed before. They’ve often said, ‘I’ve been thinking about doing this for a long time, and now I’m going to.’”

Meanwhile, among her female clients, social media has been both a boon and a curse. Instagram makes people’s lives look amazing and enviable to others, even in a pandemic. “Is it their life, though, or just what they want you to see? That’s what I ask my clients. They do kind of know that; they do the same thing themselves. I have to keep reminding them that everyone has the same struggles.”

What does she suggest will make them feel better? “Take some time off social media. It doesn’t have to be forever. And actually, I think lots of them would have really struggled without the social media.”

Counsellor Anne Guy says worry and low mood are a natural response to times of uncertainty, and it does not mean that everyone who feels this way needs help, either through medication or therapy. “People may need help managing their anxiety, but we need to be wary of focusing the problem on the individual, rather than on what is happening to society as a whole. What people may actually need right now is practical or financial support rather than medication or even counselling.”

For clients of Jan Baker, who lives in a village in North Lincolnshire, the virus seemed

to be circulating elsewhere. But in autumn, Covid hit the area badly and they have suffered loss of close family and colleagues, as well as being ill themselves.

Clients have also endured cases of long Covid, where symptoms linger for months. But, she says, they don’t talk about Covid. “They don’t want to use the therapy hour to talk about this, but it’s always in the room.

“I’ve noticed a lot of problems with anger; they don’t know what to do with it. They’re having to find ways of managing that in a safe way. Also, I’m seeing more couples. Living so closely together all the time, without the normal distractions of work and friends, and coupled with the stress of

“The issue of boundaries comes up again and again. Couples working in the same space, then straight on to dinner on the same table.”

finance and possible redundancy, people are finding their stressors are coming in one go.”

Where do the therapists who hear people’s deepest secrets and fears think we will end up after the vaccines become effective across the population or once the virus has worn itself out? Many think we won’t snap right back into our most social selves. After all, it is largely through social mixing that the coronavirus is spread.

NEED TO CHANGE

One of the last big events I attended was a book launch in early March by a renowned bereavement counsellor, Julia Samuel, an old friend of Diana, Princess of Wales and godmother to Prince George. It was filled with the great and good, from playwright Tom Stoppard to Tory ministers, from millionaire author Helen Fielding (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*) to National Health Service therapists. I spoke to Samuel recently and she agrees that her book *This Too Shall Pass* was strangely prescient.

“The thing that we will all connect with during the pandemic is that we’ve all been thrown by the change. We all think we’re doing it wrong, but we will – mostly, eventually – adapt to the need to change.”

Fox Weber says: “I think it will be a case of re-engaging; we have to be intentional about this. We have to start with making a point of pursuing curiosity. It won’t instantly satisfy, but it will remind you of the world out there.” And the people and places you used to see, and how much you used to enjoy that.

Couples counsellor Dawn Kaffel is even optimistic about where Covid may lead. “It’s a unique one-off time, so people will always remember this. It’s an opportunity to rejuvenate something that was lost. It gives you time to think about what we want from our partners and consider, ‘Am I giving you what you need?’ These are the conversations I am trying to generate with clients.” ■

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