

Transitioning out of the Pandemic

Over the past year of the pandemic, so many aspects of life have reminded me of the years I spent in different countries around the world where populations were suffering through national crises that devastated and upended lives and economies and robbed people of not only the lives of loved ones, but often also their hopes for the future.

Now with the UK coronavirus vaccination campaign well underway, we are now facing the next change of the COVID pandemic as we look towards the lifting of restrictions once again. Below are a few thoughts to consider based on learnings I have gained from different countries and contexts emerging from prolonged periods of crisis. As we all re-emerge after more than a year of the threat of COVID and restrictions that have changed the very way we live, I hope they have resonance for you and are helpful as you and your community consider this next phase.

(i) A return of freedoms

Strange as it may seem, sometimes the freedom we have longed for can be overwhelming once it comes. Although, most have longed for restrictions to end and be free to do those things that matter most to us, whether visiting and hugging friends and family, properly farewelling loved ones who have died, travelling, playing or watching sport, the freedom to do the things we missed most also come with a huge array of other choices as well. It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed or tired or indeed vulnerable/unsafe with the sheer number and range of choices that we will soon have again after such a prolonged period of restricted choices. Some of us will adapt quickly to this change, others will take much longer. In addition, some may well find having to make the decisions as to what is safe or not in the absence of any restrictions at all, more challenging than when we had clear rules/ guidance (although I suspect we have all been doing this for sometime as guidance has become less definitive). In any case, it will be important to be understanding and patient of ourselves and others as we all re-adjust, each doing so at our own pace.

(ii) Acknowledging and honouring our experiences of the pandemic.

I have repeatedly witnessed the importance of acknowledging and honouring what has been experienced during long periods of crises as an important element for both healing and moving forward together. Everyone has experienced this pandemic differently – both as individuals and as groups of people defined by things that have meant that the

disease and restrictions have disproportionately impacted them with regard to ethnicity, profession, or living conditions. When the threat of COVID has receded and restrictions lifted properly, we need spaces and opportunities to share our stories – what we have experienced over this time of crisis that has changed how we have lived for so long, and also for many the grief of losing loved ones, their own health, jobs, a sense of security, dreams and a myriad of other losses. We may well tell those stories within our individual circle of loved ones, but it can also be important that we do so in our wider communities as well. The risk of not doing so, is that the divides that have been exacerbated over the time of the pandemic, may well become even more entrenched or widen, as we fail to understand how our neighbours have experienced this time differently from ourselves and allowing the narratives of this time failing to take in the myriad of perspectives and pain the pandemic has caused.

My experience elsewhere also tells me that to share and hear those stories whilst we are still experiencing the threat of the crisis can only ever be partial. As anyone who has lost a loved one to a long illness will know, it is only after their passing, that you are truly able to grieve what has been lost and gained in the intimacy of that time. There might well be a momentum to not linger in the experience of the pandemic once this is over (and it will be over one day, however messily and certainly not on any particular day... I suspect we will just realise one day that we are just no longer worried or thinking about COVID anymore), but I hope we do. I hope we get opportunities in our faith communities, in our work places, in our local communities to reflect, to tell stories and in some way honour what has happened, whether through a time capsule or a ceremony or story circles or a myriad of other creative ways...and then drawing from those experiences and deciding how our community will be different going forwards together.

(iii) What has changed?

We hear a lot of talk of a changed world that we will emerge into at the end of the pandemic, but I wonder whether the disconnect may well be that it is us who will have changed and not the other way around. Again, as anyone emerging from the death of a loved one knows, there is a jarring between the world you once inhabited without too much thought, and the person you have become following the death. Sometimes the ways we change are temporary – like my gratitude and joy in finding safe, clean water coming out of a tap on returning from a country where it involves a great deal more than simply turning a tap, but others may be more permanent, for example, our ability or willingness to be as busy as we previously were before the pandemic. However, it can be very difficult to stay true to any life changes you may have decided to make after such a prolonged crisis, especially when the social systems you are returning to run in the opposite direction. Unless there is a tipping point of people deciding that society should really be different, then I wonder whether we will only be nostalgically looking back in a few years at the changes we

were adamant we would make coming out of this time period but we just have not been able to bring about.

(iv) Mental Health and Wellbeing:

This one is very linked to number ii. I was fortunate enough to work for a medical, humanitarian agency for over a decade that valued mental health and wellbeing as much as physical health. What that time taught me, was that as challenging as prolonged crises were for people's mental health and wellbeing, it was often after the crisis had passed that a further drop in mental well-being may occur. Sometimes this was just because people could finally access services. However for others it was because whilst we may well understand why we feel anxious or depressed in the midst of terrible times, especially when it is acceptable to express that – once a crisis passes and the initial relief and joy of the threat going away is over, we may well continue to feel the same (or worse) and see that as a failure on our own part, rather than as still linked to all we have gone through during the crises but not yet processed.

I was grateful to be a part of teams that encouraged safe spaces for discussing mental health and wellbeing as much after a national crisis as we did during and not only saw but felt the benefits myself. I just hope that we recognise that we may well feel the impacts of the pandemic and associated restrictions long after the threat of COVID has passed and we have returned to whatever normality we seek - and the importance of finding spaces (and help if necessary) for ourselves and loved ones as we continue to process and move forward.

Peace and Blessings
Carolyn

If you would like to talk further about transitioning out of the pandemic for your faith community – please contact us at info@placeforhope.org.uk