

Are we all in the same boat?

'Just because everything is different doesn't mean anything has changed.'

Irene Peter (American writer)

The pandemic is a stark reminder that we are all less in control of life than we think. As a psychotherapist and group analyst I suggest that the concerns our patients express during this challenging time often reverberate with the trepidations we have as therapists in our lives. Patients and therapists alike are vulnerable to complex interactions between forces in our internal world and unavoidable infringements from the outside. This poses dilemmas about conflicting needs and difficulties. For some the seclusion imposed by Covid 19 has been a welcome relief, a respite from their struggles and responsibilities. Others appreciate solitude, but there is a fine line between enjoying one's own company - the silence and creativity that is particular to being alone - before it slips into uncomfortable, painful isolation and abandonment. People have agonised over social distancing and enforced seclusion.

I do not wish to diminish the real suffering that many people are experiencing during this unprecedented crisis that affects the whole world: death, job losses, homelessness and domestic violence are on the increase during lockdown. Economic hardship has profound implications on peoples' mental health.

I have noticed that many of our usual responses to problems and life in ordinary times, are not necessarily so dissimilar to the ones we have during the pandemic. I have observed that people's attitudes to loss, change, or crisis are amplified during the pandemic. Existing beliefs towards life and death have been reinforced for some, whilst for others change is possible. Consider these contrasting examples from two therapy groups.

In one of the groups, consisting of several traumatised patients, the pandemic has led to entrenchments and repetitions. Without denying the upheavals created by the pandemic, the circumstances in their current lives had also positive aspects, and more so than they allowed themselves able to see. They had significant resources and being part of a reflective and supportive group offered a connectedness and space in which a deeper understanding of themselves and others was possible. Above all it was an opportunity to separate from painful past experiences in favour of engaging with existing positive resources and relationships in their present lives.

Nonetheless, this group was overfocussed on loss and disaster with persistent re-enactments in the group and their lives, in spite of therapeutic attempts and interventions from myself and group to help. These included empathic acknowledgment of their original childhood trauma, re-experienced and projected onto the virus and the group. It was important to interpret the difference between past and present, in the hope of helping them to connect with their resilience and possibilities available to them. A forward-looking approach is important in work with trauma. In short, for several reasons, the group found it difficult to change, at least at this phase in their lives.

By contrast, in another therapy group, also with traumatised patients, the response to the pandemic has been different. Although frustrated about the lockdown and enforced isolation, they were keen to meet over Zoom and appreciated the connection they could have as a group during this time. They were more able to understand how the projections from their past experiences did not serve them in their current lives. Increased awareness allowed them to search for and use resources and opportunities. Overall, the group was hopeful and proved a transformative therapeutic space.

The two different group experiences suggest that some of us are more able than others to adjust and connect with resources in times of crisis. The ability to be creative can make a significant difference as does, our ability to remain open and be connected with others. The pandemic offers possibilities for change - individually and collectively. Yet alongside, there is a heightened awareness of our limitations, doubts and regrets about previous choices or lost opportunities. Not everything can be changed. It may be too late. Perhaps the first group was more in touch with that reality.

The experiences I have observed during the pandemic, personal and professional, confirm beliefs I passionately hold as a group analyst, that essentially we are social beings. Social distancing maybe necessary, but it is contrary to our social needs. Many of us enjoy our own company and this is helpful. People also derive real comfort from their pets to deal with some of their attachment needs, but pets are not an alternative to human relationships. Groups invite connections with other human beings and we derive comfort therefrom. As we communicate our concerns, we receive support and are offered alternative perspectives; we relate to one another. All sorts of groups can help, not only therapy groups, but family and friends, neighbours, political, religious, interest groups, reflective practice groups in organisations; zoom has been invaluable. They help us to feel contained and that we belong. Building these connections in the community is particularly needed during lockdown, to ameliorate the effects of social distancing and isolation.

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