

Could the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic have any positive impact on wellbeing?

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Abstract

In a previous article, the authors have discussed the potential wellbeing impact of the coronavirus related transitions and applied the INSIGHT coaching, training and counselling model in the context of COVID-19 (Panchal, Palmer, & O’Riordan 2020). This article explores the topic of wellbeing from a more observational angle, and asks ‘Could the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic have any positive impact on wellbeing?’

Keywords: INSIGHT, PERMA, developmental, transitions, coaching, counselling, COVID-19

Abstrait

Dans un article précédent, les auteurs ont discuté de l’impact potentiel sur le bien-être des transitions liées au coronavirus et ont appliqué le modèle de coaching, de formation et de conseil INSIGHT dans le contexte de COVID-19 (Panchal, Palmer et O’Riordan 2020). Cet article explore le sujet du bien-être sous un angle plus observationnel et demande: «L’expérience de la pandémie COVID-19 pourrait-elle avoir un impact positif sur le bien-être?»

Mots-clés: INSIGHT, PERMA, développement, transitions, coaching, counseling, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely acknowledged that globally people are currently affected by the pandemic caused in a variety of ways by the coronavirus disease 2019, known as ‘COVID-19’ (or 2019-nCoV) (see Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020; WHO, 2020; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2020). This includes across the domains of physical and mental health, social relationships, finances and lifestyle. It is not surprising that the emotional responses have included anger, anxiety, generalised anxiety disorder, stress and depressive symptoms and reduced sleep quality (Huang & Zhao, 2020; Qiu, Shen, Zhao, et al., 2020; Torales, O’Higgins, Castaldelli-Maia, &

Ventriglio, 2020; Yuan, Liao, Huang et al., 2020). Most tragically, lives have been lost.

Fiorillo and Gorwood, (2020:1) assert that four or more groups of people could suffer serious mental health and psychosocial consequences of the pandemic: (a) those who have been directly or indirectly in contact with the virus; (b) those who are already vulnerable to biological or psychosocial stressors (including people affected by mental health problems); (c) health professionals (because of higher level of exposure); and (d) even people who are following the news through numerous media channels (p1). For most people, COVID-19 has affected their existence in some way.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact upon all levels of a nation state,

from the people, organisations and communities to the health, activity and wellbeing of the whole country, including the short and long-term financial implications of countries in lockdown. Figure 1 highlights the levels.

Although the effects of the pandemic have generally been very negative to people, organisations and communities, we ask in what ways, if any, could COVID-19 transitions have a positive impact on wellbeing? In reality, could there be any positive impact on wellbeing in the immediate, short, medium or long-term.

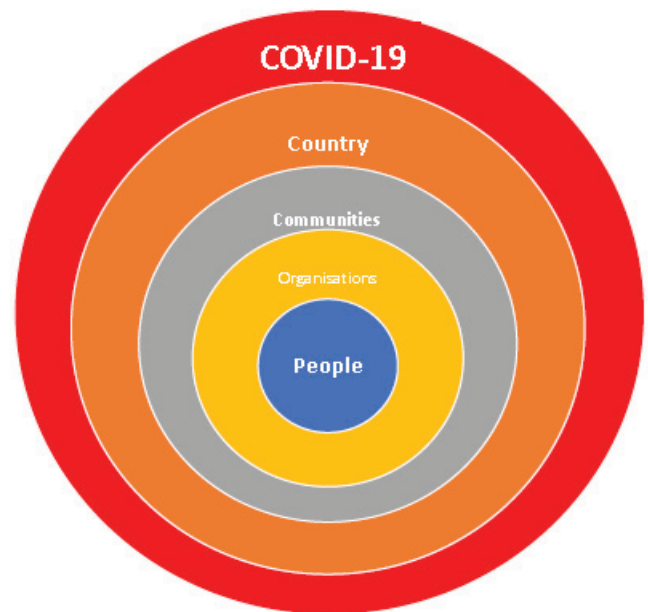
PERMA POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY MODEL

We tentatively introduce in Table 1, those potentially more positive developmental aspects of living through the pandemic, using the framework of PERMA, Martin Seligman's seminal model of positive psychology which delineates the areas that contribute to wellbeing (Seligman, 2003; 2011). The PERMA model represents 5 key areas labelled as Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement.

As outlined in Table 1, the PERMA model suggests some changes that may perhaps positively impact wellbeing. As time progresses, individuals who have realised some of these benefits will be tasked with continuing with them. Themes such as simplicity, connection and health are emerging from the COVID-19 context, which have good alignment to wellbeing. The lockdown situation has given many people an opportunity to reflect on their lifestyles and experience living in a different way.

More recently, there has been a cultural and collective focus on mental health and resilience like never before (e.g. NHS, 2020; Mental Health Foundation, 2020, Ministry of Health New Zealand Government, 2020), as people are challenged to find ways to cope with the psychological and practical realities of COVID-19. Furthermore, some people's usual 'coping' strategies such as binge drinking (in person) with friends, gambling/betting on sport, and/or comfort eating from fast-food restaurants have been widely inaccessible. However, people may also be less inclined to engage in unhealthy habits due to risks associated with this virus (e.g. obesity, diabetes, hypertension) and are thus adopting a healthier focus around nutrition and physical activity. Perhaps the duration of the lockdown may even have been sufficient for these newer activity and/or health-focused behaviours to become habitual after much practice.

Figure 1: The impact of COVID-19 upon a population at different levels



INSIGHT POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY MODEL

The INSIGHT[®] coaching, counselling and training model is grounded in positive and coaching psychology theory, research, strategies and techniques (Panchal, Palmer, & Green, 2019; Panchal, Palmer, & O'Riordan, 2019; Palmer & Panchal, 2011). The acronym INSIGHT[®] represents seven key areas: Increase self-knowledge; Normalise transitions; Support positive coping; Integrate past, present and future; Give time and space; Highlight broader context; Tailor solutions. The INSIGHT model has recently been discussed as a framework to enhance transition resilience in the context of COVID-19 (Panchal, Palmer, & O'Riordan 2020). Figure 2 highlights how the seven key transition strengths can be cultivated and developed.

The model suggests that times of transition and uncertainty can provide an opportunity for personal growth; and for some may even result in enhanced wellbeing. Uncertain times require an even greater focus on self-care and resilience, which may have long-lasting future benefits.

Table 1 Applying the PERMA Model to COVID-19

PERMA	POSSIBLE POSITIVE EFFECTS: Wellbeing
Positive Emotion	<p>Gratitude. Some may be experiencing gratitude in ways that they had not before, given the context of COVID-19. This could be gratitude for their health, for the support of healthcare, other key workers and friends and families, for their incomes, their homes. A significant shift towards a health versus consumer focus may mean that some take stock and reflect in a different way, on what they have, rather than what they lack.</p> <p>Mindfulness. The context also encourages present mindedness, in that it becomes harder to make plans and focus on the future given the significant uncertainty. Being mindful of, and savouring, daily experiences may become more likely for some. They could experience a general 'slowing down' as commutes and social plans are removed.</p>
Engagement	<p>Strengths. In lockdown scenarios people may have the opportunity to use their strengths in different ways – for example to learn new skills and hobbies, and to help others.</p>
Relationships	<p>Family and Significant Relationships. The COVID-19 context presents a unique opportunity to strengthen relationships. Many families are spending time together when otherwise they might be at school and work. This can present multiple challenges but also has potential upsides.</p> <p>Support. Although in many ways people's face to face social circles have been reduced, the nature of relationships could change in a positive way in a virtual setting, and new ones could develop. People may well also be offering and receiving help in practical and emotional ways to friends, family, significant relationships, neighbours and members of their community.</p>
Meaning	<p>Connection. Lockdown situations force locality, which can represent a change for many towards immediate communities. Feeling a greater sense of connection to their local community may promote a sense of meaning for some. Others may achieve this through greater family and/or significant relationship connection[s].</p> <p>Helping. The novel coronavirus context presents countless chances to help others, from small acts of kindness to volunteering in more significant ways. This opens up a new channel from which to derive meaning which may not have been apparent before. People may even be reflecting on the positive environmental impact of COVID-19 in a meaningful way.</p> <p>Work. For many COVID-19 is affecting their working lives. This may lead to more meaningful work for those that are forced to make changes.</p>
Achievement	<p>Context. People may be evaluating what achievement means to them as parameters change around them. Work and financial measures may give way to relationship goals and progress. COVID-19 promotes a reflection on use of resources, and the need to be resourceful may lead to a sense of challenge and achievement for some.</p> <p>Physical Activity/Exercise. Increased engagement by individuals on exercise and physical activity (e.g. walking, cycling) at this time, may lead to a sense of achievement, and positive habituation during and post periods of restrictions and lockdown.</p>

Figure 2: An application of the individual INSIGHT model in the context of COVID-19 transitions.
(Panchal, Palmer, & O’Riordan 2020: 3-4)

Strength description	Potential actions
1. Increasing self-knowledge	
I reflect on my personality, strengths and values during transitions, and use these to guide decisions.	<p>Consider your strengths. Take stock of your strengths (see www.viacharacter.org). Leverage your strengths to boost wellbeing. For example, if creativity is a strength, find some new creative pursuits; if it is social intelligence, find ways to bring people together virtually.</p> <p>Work with your personality. How do you prefer to do things? Are you spontaneous or structured? Prefer time with others or alone? Organise yourself accordingly. Plan routines and social interaction according to your needs.</p>
2. Normalising transitions	
I appreciate that transitions take time, involve a range of emotions, and affect all of us.	<p>Keep these ‘transition truths’ in mind:</p> <p>Transitions take time. Don’t expect too much of yourself and others as you adapt to new circumstances. Recognise small achievements and progress.</p> <p>Transitions involve emotions. Accept all the emotions you are feeling - anxiety, fear and sadness. Acknowledge any positive feelings too, such as gratitude and connection.</p> <p>Transitions affect everyone. With COVID-19 transitions in particular, everyone is impacted in some way, and many will be having similar experiences to you.</p>
3. Supporting positive coping	
I draw upon positive coping strategies during transitions	<p>Focus on the basics: Prioritise sleep, diet, relaxation and exercise.</p> <p>Engage support and connect: People may feel isolated and lonely in the changing circumstances. Find people you can openly talk to, and try out new forms of communication.</p> <p>Monitor input: Limit your exposure to the news; rely on credible sources.</p> <p>Take control: The COVID-19 situation is highly uncertain and ever-changing. Try to focus on what you can control rather than what you can’t. It may help to focus on one day at a time rather than looking too far into the future.</p> <p>Set boundaries: As home/work/school environments merge, think about boundaries between them. Rules and structures can be useful e.g. I will look at my emails between 7 and 9am.</p> <p>Help others: Volunteering to support others affected by the crisis can help you maintain wellbeing by focusing on others’ needs.</p> <p>Gratitude: Try to appreciate what you have, and look for the good in every day.</p>

4. Integrating past, present and future	
I can make helpful connections between past, present and future during transitions	<p>Past: <i>What skills, ideas and perspectives from your past can be applied in the current situation? How have you handled past transition?</i></p> <p>Future: <i>How might this situation connect with your future? Perhaps it allows you to strengthen certain relationships, develop new skills, or adapt working practices and career direction. Imagine yourself at a point in the future – how would you like to look back on this time?</i></p>
5. Giving time and space	
I allow myself time and space to reflect during transitions	<p>Find time. <i>Some will have more time than before, others less. Everyone will benefit from reflection time and space to process their experiences during this challenging period. You could do this alone (e.g. daily journaling), or with others (friend, counsellor, coach). Most companies offer Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) where you can talk to a trained counsellor confidentially, and at no cost.</i></p>
6. Highlighting broader context	
I am aware of the broader context during transitions, and understand the influences around me	<p>Helpful perspectives. <i>Ideas connected to the broader context may be useful - 'This is a change that is impacting many people around the world - we are all in this together'; 'We are all required to make changes in order to help not only ourselves but for the greater good. What we do at this time matters'</i></p> <p>Check influences. <i>Be mindful of influences from family, friends and colleagues at this time. Make decisions and choices that make sense for you.</i></p>
7. Tailoring action	
I take positive and constructive action steps during transitions	<p>Set goals. <i>Short-term goals can be constructive. These could be weekly or even daily. Take small steps to move forward.</i></p> <p>Recognise achievements. <i>Acknowledge achievements, however small. Writing these down regularly can help to consolidate them in your mind.</i></p>

In conclusion, to encourage greater self-insight and reflection, conceivably a question we might ask ourselves or our coachees and clients, is: Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, has your wellbeing increased, has your wellbeing decreased, or is it about the same? A question such as this may trigger individuals to reflect on their own personal experience, and separate their own feelings from those commonly referenced by those around them, and in general social discourse. Given that some time has now passed since COVID-19 changes came into play, such questions also allows an evaluative assessment of the overall period to date, which transcends day-to-day fluctuations, and can inform future short, medium and long-term goal development during the coaching process. ■

Citation

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