



Let the bright ones in Covid-19 has brought many changes, says psychotherapist Julia Samuel, so embrace the

My client Deze recently said to me, “I just want my life back. I want to get back to *normal*.” She was voicing a sentiment many of us feel, but built into that statement was a truth most of us also know: there is no “going back to normal”.

In the past 12 months, the overwhelming events of Covid-19 have turned our lives upside down. For some it has been the traumatic death of a significant person; for others, the devastating loss of their job; and for everyone, the loss of their usual routines, life events and ways of being. Everyone has their own unique response to change, which will be as true in the opening up of restrictions as it was in the lockdowns. Some may find it will take as much psychological energy to step back out into the world as it did to retreat from it.

For many, Covid-19 will be the defining

experience of their lives to date, and it has inevitably changed us all. We may wish to resist that change and the fear it engenders. But, annoying as it is, it is through discomfort that we face our new reality. In fact, the things we do to block that discomfort are the things that in the end do us harm. The hard truth is: we need to adapt in order to grow.

The research in the field of lifespan development is robust: those who try to remain rigidly the same are more likely to suffer. On the other hand, research demonstrates that one possible outcome from loss, surprisingly, is what we term post-traumatic growth. This is not a shallow switch, simply turning something bad into good. Rather, when we allow ourselves to recognise and grieve the pain of the event we have lived through, experiencing and expressing

the loss, we may also find that in the process of adjustment, we grow from it. It often means that we are more resilient than we expected, that our perspective on what matters has changed, and we take new strength from the meaning life now has for us. As a grief psychotherapist, I have been examining my own experience, and that of my clients, to identify the ways we can learn from it.

As I look back, I know that the full implications of how the past year has brought about change in me are still unfolding. At peak moments of the crisis I recognised my craving for safety, and my reluctance to give up familiar old habits. This played out in something apparently insignificant - my persistent need to make plans. I was forced to face the unwelcome process of loss every time I, believing optimism was the best attitude to have, doggedly made a plan - to meet my newborn

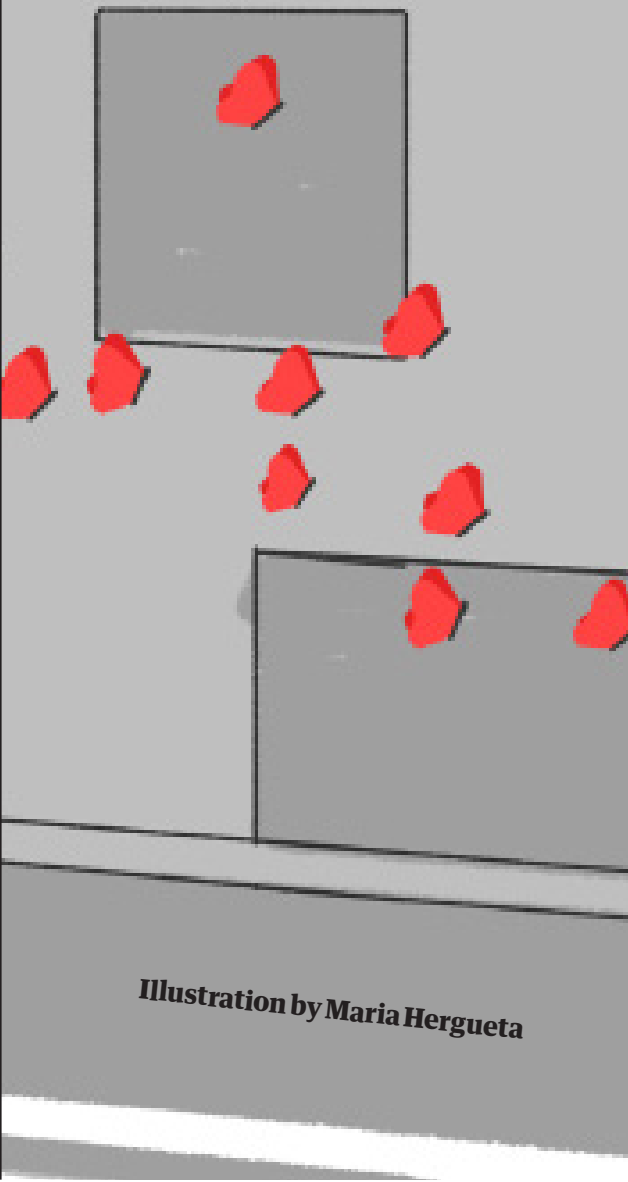


Illustration by Maria Hergueta

good and grow from the bad

grandchild, or to travel to Scotland - only to feel the thud of disappointment when I had to cancel. This was followed by a mini physiological storm of distress as it vented through my mind and body, finally releasing me into my new reality, which I had to accept. I had to learn to live with uncertainty. I no longer had control.

This cycle could begin and end within a matter of hours; at one level it was not a big deal. But my adaptation of my core belief that I cannot control what happens, I can only control my response when external events hit me, is a profound one. I can now liberate myself from the false belief that I am “in charge” and allow myself to enjoy the freedom of living in the moment. I hope it sticks.

One of the big shifts I have heard from clients, friends and colleagues is how their relationship with time has been altered. Pre-pandemic,

busyness was one of the more bonkers hallmarks of value, and of course drove people to burn out. For many of us, living and working from home has brought time affluence, rather than the default, time poverty. Although for parents, the months of home schooling threw that for a loop, particularly for mothers.

But not having to commute, or travel to meetings, or even be social, means people have found they have free time. My client Max told me he had an epiphany: “I will never live my life at that pace again. I was crazy. I travelled nonstop, running at 100mph, and by the time I came home at the weekend I was totally exhausted.” Work got the best of him, and home the “dregs”. The richness of having more time has given people opportunities to discover versions of themselves that had been pressed into hiding.

For some, that has been surprisingly enriching. Their creativity has grown, and they have more time for sport and fitness. For people to continue to create space for those versions of themselves, they will need to commit to the decision to do so. This will be most effective if you have a clear vision of who you want to be and how that might feel, and you’re able to picture your renewed confidence if you did so. (See box below for a framework to follow.)

For me, the most valuable aspect of having more time is that it allows us all to prioritise our relationships. This includes our family, our colleagues and our friends. The absence of being with people has been one of the most chilling, difficult parts of lockdown.

Having meaningful, connected relationships means we live longer; are healthier, wealthier, happier; and even have less pain as we grow old. Love is strong medicine. But love requires time. It cannot survive on a thin diet of scant conversations and transactional decisions. We need time to move towards each other, to openly connect and be together. It takes time to unravel and resolve misunderstandings and fights, time to repair after a fight, which is the foundation of trusting relationships. Will we embed this understanding of how important connection is, post-lockdown? It is hard to resist falling back into old patterns, but my guess is that the painful mark of the absence of connection will lead to boldness in wanting to live differently.

One of the key aspects of post-traumatic growth is that it changes our perception of what matters, and amplifies our gratitude for small things and for simply being alive. There is nothing like a health pandemic to raise awareness of our mortality and the mortality of those we love. People have had more conversations about death and dying in the past year than in their entire lifetimes, and paradoxically it has meant we value life more. It has radically altered our vision of ourselves and the future we hope for. Many of our concerns about performance and achievement

have diminished in recognition that meaning in life is a more substantive goal.

At the other end of the spectrum, it has rejuvenated our joy in small things. Who would have thought hugging a friend and sitting down to supper with them in a cafe would feel like the greatest gift? We must strive never to take that for granted as we go forward.

The process of unlocking is likely to be tricky for some. I have clients who are fearful that they won’t know how to socialise any more; they have fugo - fear of going out. One of my most successful clients, who used to fly regularly, was shocked to feel a spike of fear when her colleague said she needed to meet him in Germany. The prospect of commuting and the busyness of office life is filling many with dread. The key to manage it is to support yourself in it, not to fight it. Turn to yourself with compassion and name your fears. Allow them. Breathe. Write them down. Go slowly, don’t push yourself; go to the edge of your comfort zone in small steps. Give yourself credit for getting there, and when that feels easy, push yourself to try something else. It will take time.

We would not have chosen to have this experience, and yet we must not waste the opportunity to learn what it has given us. If we have the courage to face our insight with self-compassion, to learn to know ourselves rather than distract ourselves, then change will bring growth ■ *Names have been changed*

A guided reflection on change

Get a notebook and write down your answers, or talk to someone you trust and take it in turns to explore these questions.

What has changed?

In your relationship with yourself? Your relationships with friends and family? Your relationships with work and with health - and any other important aspect of your life?

From those changes...

Which ones would you like to keep? How might you support yourself to embed them? This will include what you say to yourself, as well as your habits and decisions.

Consider

What are the things likely to get in the way? **Remember, small steps can have big outcomes** Picture yourself in a year’s time, after you have adapted and transitioned into the version of yourself and your life that you wish for. How would that feel? What would your belief about yourself be? Keep a list; make a mood board or Pinterest board of images that will inspire you in the weeks and months ahead. Add to it and change it, as you adapt and change.

This Too Shall Pass, by Julia Samuel, is published by Penguin at £9.99. To order a copy for £9.29, go to [guardianbookshop.com](https://www.guardianbookshop.com)