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THE TIMES

NEWS

How we grew happier in lockdown

Matt Chorley, Red Box Editor

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If you're happy and you know it wash your hands. If you're happy and you know it and you really want to show it, stay at home and wash your hands.

One of the weirdest feelings of this extraordinary crisis is that of surreal calm. In the movies everyone would be constantly running around in a state of panic; hiding from zombies, dodging meteors, staying just ahead of the infectious monkeys.

They never show the people quietly staying at home out of the way, living in a smaller but not very dramatic world.

Of course if you are working on the front line of this battle, it is a different story. A mixture of anger, frustration, tiredness and grief coursing through your veins as you try to do what you were trained to do, often in unbearable circumstances without the protective equipment which might put some of your mind at rest.

And if you have lost a loved one, lost your job or business, this is an impossibly stressful time.

Yet despite the appalling rising death toll, and the stories of businesses on the brink of collapse, for millions of people this crisis is no great crisis at all.

If you've got your health and can work from home, or as a retired person find you're already match-fit for a bit of self-isolation, the past few weeks have been notable for being uneventful.

So you would expect the latest

[YouGov survey](#)

asking people how they have felt in the past week to show a rise in boredom. Since the start of the lockdown in March the proportion of people saying they feel bored has doubled from 17 per cent to 40 per cent last week, (although even this has dropped two points in the past week, perhaps as we grow used to it and find things to do).

More surprising is the spread of happiness. Half of people said they were happy at the start of March, around the time of the first reported death from coronavirus. As the scale of the pandemic engulfed the news and the nation this collapsed to 25 per cent.

But since the lockdown has been in force it has risen, steadily, to hit 40 per cent in polling carried out on Sunday and Monday this week. Young people (18-24-year-olds) are inevitably most likely to be happy, although at 48 per cent now this is well below the 66 per cent seen in mid-February. Probably all the Valentine's cards they got.

Amazingly Remainers are more likely to be happy (41 per cent) than Leavers (37 per cent). Labour voters (42 per cent) happier than Tories (39 per cent). But everyone is happier than a few weeks ago.

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Similarly the proportion of people saying they are “content” dropped from 29 to 13 per cent in early March, but is now back up at 39 per cent. The percentage saying they are stressed is back at the lowest levels since Christmas and New Year.

Even the percentage who say they are scared, which peaked at 36 per cent before the lockdown, is back down to pre-crisis average of 17 per cent. Sadness and loneliness have remained relatively flat through the whole thing, though we should acknowledge that there is an underlying problem in a society where one in five people feels alone in normal times.

What is driving us all to feel happy in this miserable horror movie existence? It seems that if you have no health or money worries, staying at home with your family, having time to do those things you’ve been putting off and learning to enjoy the small things in life is good for the soul.

After the uncertainty of the early pandemic created a sense of powerlessness, the lockdown gave us something to do. And for most people it was relatively easy: stay at home.

“People find what they don’t know very frightening and once they have some idea of where it is going, not the end, but how they are going to cope, they feel much more secure,” [Julia Samuel](#), the psychotherapist, tells me.

People are also “discovering aspects of themselves that they have never had the opportunity before”, she adds, like cooking, being creative, playing games, reading, gardening, spending time with family, not rushing. We have stopped the world and let everyone get off.

“Busyness is an anaesthetic, it stops you feeling,” Samuel explains. “Having time means that you emotionally experience much more so you are freer. On the usual weekly treadmill you spend all week rushing around getting tired, at the weekend you just about recover, and then do it all again. Now we all have time. Until the late 20th century nobody moved, and now we never stop.”

So unable to get angry about a commute that doesn’t exist, frustrated with that annoying colleague opposite, flustered about the clashing children’s parties, stressed about missing a flight or play or envelope opening, we have become happier with our (smaller) lot.

One man who understands the importance of optimism and happiness is Boris Johnson. His reappearance outside Downing Street focused much more on the positives, that the lockdown is working, the NHS has not been overwhelmed, this virus can be beaten and Britain will be even stronger as a result.

“I believe we are coming now to the end of the first phase of this conflict,” he said, straining not to just Ctrl-C Ctrl-V Churchill’s: “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

He promised the “maximum transparency” in the decision-making process about lifting some of the lockdown, while also saying that “we simply cannot spell out now how fast or slow or even when those changes will be made”. Talks are planned with Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party tomorrow, although this is more about explaining thinking to avoid petty point-scoring than national unity government.

And if the five government tests for easing restrictions – deaths falling, NHS protected, rate of infection down, testing and PPE sorted, and avoiding a second peak – are met then that will be the time to move on to the second phase, the PM said.

This means keeping some measures in place, probably for a long time, to ensure the reproduction rate of the disease, the R rate, is below one, so that every person with coronavirus infects on average less than one person.

Then we can “begin gradually to refine the economic and social restrictions and one by one to fire up the engines of this vast UK economy”, Johnson added.

However, having feared the British public might not go quietly into lockdown there is now concern about getting us out of it. What was once an thinkable state to find ourselves in is now an unthinkable one to leave.

If people are happy and content at home, are not itching to get back to the office or shops, then the economy will falter further.

[The Guardian](#)

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splash reports on ministerial fears that millions of people will be too fearful to return to work.

[The Times](#)

says that schools are unlikely to be among the first to reopen, in part because it would add to the R value without any real economic gain. There are also concerns that parents, especially those who have got used to juggling homeworking and homeschooling, would be reluctant to send their children in.

[Pubs, restaurants and cafés](#)

are likely to be some of the last to reopen, but be honest: if your local was open tonight would you rush back to a bar packed with people and infection? Many wouldn't.

Impose social distancing on them and the number of customers will make many businesses

[unviable anyway](#)

Despite all the talk of the lockdown "fraying", and Tory donors and has-beens demanding something be done, public support for most of the measures remains strong. In part this is because it is easier for people to understand the imperative of preventing coronavirus deaths now than the rather abstract idea of a deep recession leading to health complications later.

People understand Johnson's warning that this is the the moment of maximum risk, that a second wave of death and disease would be disastrous.

Likening the virus to "an unexpected and invisible mugger", Johnson insisted: "This is the moment when we have begun together to wrestle it to the floor."

Many people will conclude that if they happily stay at home they won't get mugged.

Downing Street is so concerned about this that the "stay home, protect the NHS, save lives" message is being overhauled by a team including Isaac Levido, the Tory election campaign chief.

Johnson is a natural optimist, to the fury of his critics who sometimes conflate an ability to project a sunny disposition with a lack of seriousness or intelligence. There is also a risk that his cheerful bonhomie will grate and anger while the death toll rises each day.

A fun speech and a hair ruffle is not going to stop you getting sick. But it might help to heal the economy.

If Johnson is to coax Britain back to work, he needs to ensure that the public answers his call for a "spirit of optimism and energy".

Otherwise when the moment comes to get people back out there, working and spending, there is a real risk that we respond that we are quite happy where we are thanks.

Matt Chorley's analysis first appeared in The Times Red Box morning newsletter. Subscribe at thetimes.co.uk/bulletins

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