



Expectations during a Global Pandemic

2020 and the start of 2021 has been a time unlike any other for most of us and a lot has been **expected** of everyone as we confront the massive loss of life as well as the loss of our “way of life as we know it” in the face of Coronavirus.

And we’ve all just had to get on with it to some degree or the other. But how are you feeling about that, now that we’re one year on from the start of the first lockdown in England?

Have you spent a large part of the last 12 months putting a vast amount of pressure on yourself or feeling that others have been piling that on you too? And how do you feel and react when you’re under pressure? Often we can be snappy, irritable and stressed so we stop sleeping and the irritation snowballs.

Meanwhile, you’re also probably telling yourself that “you have to be strong”; “you have to get on with it”; “we’re all in the same boat” or something similar. Does this sound familiar?

So what expectations have you been experiencing over the last 12 months?

Here’s some examples:

- Stay at home
- Stay socially distanced from older family members and avoid contact with everyone (no matter how much you/they need that support and a hug)
- Shield (everyone is a danger to you)
- Work from home
- Bake!
- Cover for colleagues and take on extra work responsibilities
- Get a new job even though the economy is struggling
- Feel grateful that you’ve been furloughed rather than lost your job
- Understand complex and ever changing rules, guidelines and tiers but don’t watch too much news
- Keep your children at home and educate them well; don’t let them fall too far behind
- Be grateful for more time with those that live with you

- Be okay with a lack of space and solitude or conversely enjoy more space and solitude
- Have regular swab tests done
- Miss birthdays and other special occasions
- Be available for video calls at all times
- Wear a mask
- Join support bubbles
- Be able to grieve your losses on your own and in silence (because everyone is finding this tough).

The list could, quite frankly continue for pages as there's just so many things that we've had to get on with, perhaps because it's what we've been instructed to do or maybe because it's what we expect of ourselves.

Or is that you're doing what others need you to do? (How often have you stepped in to help others without a second thought even though you know you're completely exhausted)?

Why this is difficult

Firstly, a lot of these expectations conflict with how we actually feel. For example, "I feel sad but I'm expected to feel grateful".

Secondly, I think everyone would agree that this period in time has been stressful but we're human, and humans aren't designed to sustain high levels of stress for prolonged periods of time. Particularly when shielding or in isolation and without access to the mechanisms that would usually help us to feel better e.g. being able to chat things over with friends or go to the gym.

Add in the extra pressure/danger to our own lives, the lives of our loved ones as well as our livelihoods and lifestyles that are being severely threatened, it's no surprise that our resilience is low and our ability to bounce back is compromised.

This can very easily lead to **burnout** but can also translate into **anxiety** and/or **depression**, particularly if you have an **internal critical voice** that tells you you're not doing enough. This voice may also be wondering why you were okay fulfilling all these expectations last year, but this year, you find you're no longer able to.

I believe that this is because of our now **lower emotional resilience**. Imagine this as a game of Jenga. Last year, we started "the game" on a stable flat surface so we could balance some challenging expectations. The year, you don't have the same stable footing to build on, so the stability is quickly compromised.

The main reason for the lower resilience for most is the loss of connections and social interactions. As a social species we miss the connections with others and this results in us feeling lonely and isolated.

We also need a connection with the outdoors/nature/natural world and actually lockdown has been good for many of us in this respect as we've been encouraged to spend more time outdoors locally. I know I for one, have spent a lot more time listening to birdsong than before.

However there's one last element of connection most of us forget to give any thought to and that's our connection with our **internal self and inner world**. For me, this means knowing what's important to me and why. In knowing these "whats and whys" we can work towards the things that we know will bring satisfaction, joy and pleasure. This results in us being passionate and focussed in what we're doing, which in turn increases our levels of resilience.

What you can do

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If this fits with your experiences, and you feel like your “resilience battery” needs a bit of a re-charge, here’s some ideas and thoughts that you might find helpful. Counsellors have a tendency to call this self-care but here’s some examples of things you can try.

- ♥ Be kind to yourself and give yourself permission to not be okay. This might mean saying no to the demands of others.
- ♥ Ignore your inner critic.
- ♥ Take a break from the pressures with a healthy escape e.g. exercise, music or a good book.
- ♥ Focus on things that are in your control and take care of your own wellbeing e.g. ensure you’re getting some exercise outdoors, eating well and staying hydrated.
- ♥ Give some thought to the things you want to achieve in the short term and work towards those goals – its okay to ask for help with this.
- ♥ Limit time spent on social media and news as they often increase anxiety levels.
- ♥ Tell someone openly and honestly how you’re feeling. Saying things out loud can make the issue less overwhelming and in some cases this can resolve the conflicting thoughts that keep circling in your mind.
- ♥ Speak to a professional about how you’re feeling.

All of these suggestions help you to connect with your own emotional world and allow you to move away from the expectations of others and what you “should” be doing, Instead, you can take responsibility for and focus on the things that you want to be doing as we all work our way individually and collectively along the “roadmap” of lockdown restrictions.

My experience to date is that exploring your own expectations as well as what others expect of you, in counselling, has a positive impact. If this is something you'd like to look at, get in touch.

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