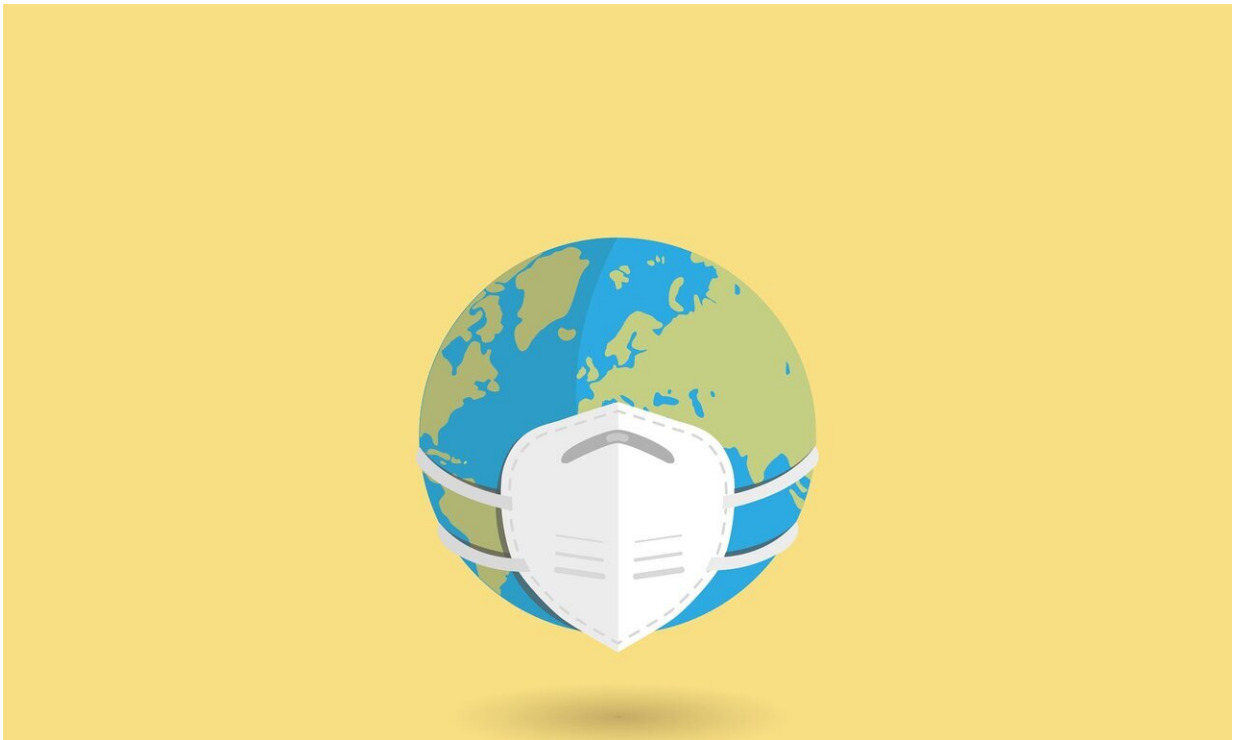


Study identifies 'post-traumatic growth' emerging from COVID-19 lockdowns

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Results from a new study which draws on survey data collected during the peak of the first wave of the pandemic suggests that being forced to slow down life, as a consequence of lockdown, has had significant, positive impacts for many people and their families.

The research, recently published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* from a team at the University of Bath with international colleagues, analyzed survey results from 385 caregivers of children aged 6-16 both in the UK and Portugal. Individuals completed an online questionnaire between 1 May 2020 and 27 June 2020.

This cohort had experienced considerable adversity because of COVID-19. 70% were working exclusively from home, almost half reported a reduction in income and nearly all children (93%) were being home schooled at the time. In addition, one in five identified at least one family member who was suspected or had been infected with COVID-19.

Yet despite all this, when asked the question—"Do you think there are any positive to come out of this pandemic and of the social distancing restrictions?"—88% of respondents said 'yes'.

Their responses fell into four key areas, which the researchers describe collectively as examples of 'post-traumatic growth'—whereby individuals experience positive effects following stressful or traumatic events:

- 48% described a growth in family relationships. One participant explained how the lockdown had brought "closer relationships and a better understanding of each other." Carers also positively reported spending more time together as a family, had more involvement in their children's lives, and felt closer, whilst also feeling more connected to other family members.
- 22% described feeling a greater appreciation for life, involving the re-assessment of their personal values and priorities and the opportunity to 'reconsider what's really important'. This included increased appreciation and gratitude for the simpler things in life, with opportunities for 'reconnection with small pleasures' and

less consumerism and reliance on material things. It also involved the adoption of a healthier lifestyle (22%) because 'life has slowed down', resulting in less stress and 'an opportunity to enjoy the garden and the quiet of the day.'

- 16% described spiritual growth, which involved a greater engagement with fundamental, existential issues. This included a greater appreciation for others (in particular health and essential workers), a 'stronger sense of community' and an 'acknowledgement of inequalities' (in particular outdoor space). It also included environmental benefits through 'less car use' creating less air pollution, which was 'better for the environment'.
- 11% described discovering and embracing new opportunities and possibilities, which was reflected in comments about changes in working practice, involving positive 'changes in attitudes to home working' and the adoption of a 'better work/life balance'. It was also reflected through opportunities to learn or develop new skills, particularly 'acquiring new technology-related competencies.' These were highlighted as particularly important by carers as they increasingly relied on technology for work, educating their children and socializing. Others described the positive opportunity to home educate their children, with one carer reporting: "I have always wanted to home school but cannot afford to...this has been a wonderful experience."

Lead researcher, Professor Paul Stallard of the University of Bath's Department for Health, explains: "Of course, the pandemic has affected all our lives in significant ways, most obviously the understandable and substantial negative impact it has placed on our mental health which we know has been acute for very many.

"But that is not the full story. Many respondents in our study emphasized what we had heard anecdotally about some of the positive effects people have derived from leading their lives in quieter, slower ways because of

lockdowns.

"These are important findings. Not only do we identify what some of these positive experiences have been, but we also show that those people who have been able to find those positives had better mental wellbeing than those who did not. And it gives us clues about how we might build back happier and healthier by embracing aspects of a quieter life and those small, positives that have emerged from this period."

Co-author, Dr. Ana Isabel Pereira of the University of Lisbon added: "This study also suggests strategies that families returning to a more restrictive lockdown in several countries can use. It is important, especially in these moments of high adversity, to find meaning and purpose in these experiences.

"In each moment, we can find new ways to connect and build stronger connections with our children, partner or friends; to choose how we can make the best use of this time of confinement and to help others in the community experiencing more adversity or with fewer resources navigate this period."

More information: Paul Stallard et al, Post-traumatic growth during the COVID-19 pandemic in carers of children in Portugal and the UK: cross-sectional online survey, *BJPsych Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1192/bjo.2021.1](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2021.1)

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