

Lockdown changed how much we thought about the future and other people, new study shows

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Prolonged social isolation and changes to work opportunities during the first UK lockdown were linked with important changes in people's

thought patterns, a new study suggests.

The first UK lockdown caused huge disruption to people's social and work lives. As part of the study, researchers analyzed people's thought patterns to see what effect these changes had on our everyday thoughts.

Researchers texted participants at random times during their day over one week, asking them what they had just been thinking about and what they were doing.

They then compared the thought patterns from this dataset to a comparable dataset gathered before the lockdown.

Lead author, Brontë McKeown, a Ph.D. Student from the Department of Psychology said:

"Normally, people spend a lot of time thinking about other people and planning for the future in their daily lives. We found that both of these thought patterns were disrupted during lockdown.

"We found that future thinking was reduced overall during lockdown, and only seemed to occur at pre-lockdown levels when people were actively engaged in work.

"We know that future thinking is generally associated with positive mental health outcomes so the fact that this type of thinking was reduced in lockdown may help explain some of the negative emotional changes documented during this time.

"People were also alone a lot more during lockdown. And when they *were* alone, they tended to think about other people *less* than before lockdown. But on the rare occasions when people were able to interact with others, they thought *more* about other people than before lockdown.

"These findings suggest that how much we think about other people depends on how much we interact with them: we are social thinkers because we live in a social world. During prolonged periods of physical isolation, we reduce the amount of time we think about others and when we do get to engage in [social interaction](#), that promotes a bigger increase in our social thoughts."

Dr. Giulia Poerio, co-author and Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Essex said: "Anecdotally people have reported changes in aspects of their mental lives brought about by the pandemic, such as changes in what occupies their thoughts or dreams. Our study is the first to actually document the systematic changes that have occurred in thinking patterns during this unprecedented time.

"Our findings are exciting because they show how important our [external environment](#) and social interactions are for shaping what is going on *internally* and suggest that changing our external world could be one way of changing the (mal)adaptive thought patterns that make up so much of our waking lives."

As well as changes to social and future thinking, they also found that [older adults](#) (55-78 years) experienced more detailed thoughts during their virtual social interactions compared to in-person ones during the lockdown. This increase in detailed thoughts for older adults during virtual interactions may be linked to the phenomenon of 'zoom fatigue'.

Researchers said the findings highlighted the important role our social and working lives play in shaping what we think, and how we think, as we go about our everyday lives.

The research was conducted in collaboration with Queen's University, Canada and the University of Essex.

The paper called, "The impact of [social isolation](#) and changes in work patterns on ongoing thought during the first COVID-19 [lockdown](#) in the United Kingdom, " is published in *PNAS*.

More information: The impact of social isolation and changes in work patterns on ongoing thought during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the United Kingdom, *PNAS* (2021). doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2102565118

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