

COVID pandemic: Three years on and nobody wants to talk about it. Here's why we should

March 24 2023, by Jonathan Breckon



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Three years ago, Boris Johnson [made a unique address to the British public](#). Sitting at a desk in Downing Street, hands firmly clasped and hair

more kempt than usual, Johnson told the nation: "You must stay at home."

The first lockdown had begun.

Today, nobody wants to talk about COVID. Focus has shifted to other permacrises, such as the soaring cost of living, the NHS meltdown and the war in Ukraine.

Not wanting to think about or talk about the pandemic is understandable when it has been so exhausting. Who wouldn't rather it just went away? But the pain, grief, hassle and [economic impact](#) are still very real.

As a research lead for [the International Public Policy Observatory](#) (a collaborative research group that informs policymakers about the best ways to address social harms in the UK), my work focuses on how governments are tackling society's recovery from the pandemic. Policymakers tell me that while the world has mentally moved on from the pandemic, experiences from that period continue to shape their conversations about society's resilience, and how we tackle everything from school snow days to climate change.

Although we no longer want to talk about COVID, it's very apparent that its ramifications are widespread.

Illness is still with us, with around [2 million people](#) reporting symptoms of long COVID. A [recent study in Scotland](#) found that nearly half the people infected with COVID reported feeling only partially recovered six to 18 months later (4% had been vaccinated). And despite the welcome decline in deaths, many people are [still catching COVID](#).

I am one of those that have long COVID symptoms. But while I'm lucky enough to be able to plow on, many others [can't keep working](#). Plowing

on regardless is neither a good personal policy nor a good national policy. By ignoring the underlying COVID causes, it's too easy to ignore the deep longer-term issues that confront us.

Smack in the middle of so many problems

In his first speech as UK [prime minister](#), Rishi Sunak recognized the scale of the economic crisis and that "[the aftermath of COVID still lingers](#)." But it's doing a lot more than lingering. It's smack in the middle of so many of our current problems.

Despite all the other effects on the economy, the UK is still reeling from the scale of the recession caused by the pandemic. It was an unprecedented economic crisis in [modern times](#), with a GDP drop of 11% when the lockdown hit hard in 2020—[the steepest drop](#) since consistent records began in 1948.

Pandemic-induced [losses](#) for both [economic output](#) and employment will be significant in coming years, according to the International Monetary Fund.

It's also not surprising that finances are in dire straits. The UK government borrowed an [extra £330 billion](#) across 2020–21 and 2021–22.

Denying the centrality of COVID also matters because there are unique UK problems that there is still time to address. Other countries are [recovering faster](#) from COVID.

The UK is one of the few countries where economic inactivity among older age groups is [still higher than it was pre-pandemic](#). Although the exact reason for this "great resignation" is unclear, the pandemic has exacerbated the [UK's trend towards deteriorating health](#).

To recover from COVID, the UK can learn from other countries. The emergence of an accelerating mental health crisis has commanded increasing attention from policymakers around the world.

For example, in Norway, the government has [allocated funds](#) to youth mental health to create more easily accessible treatments. And in India, a free national [tele-mental health](#) service has been launched, with 23 centers offering phone-based support at all hours offered in multiple languages.

Remembering COVID also matters because the crisis provided an opportunity to reset so many things in society and the economy. Do you recall some of that early optimism at the start of the lockdowns? About no longer commuting, about re-engaging with your [local parks](#) and [green spaces](#), about clapping key workers outside your front door? That feels like a very distant memory now. But some countries have implemented changes that outlasted the pandemic.

In Australia, telehealth services for [mental health](#) treatment, which were temporarily introduced during the pandemic were [made permanent in January 2022](#) to allow citizens better access to remote options.

Personally, I'm trying to face my long COVID head-on. Doing more hospital tests, telling people more about it, and using the online NHS [post-COVID recovery program](#). Global recovery from the [pandemic](#) is not over yet, but there is still time to make changes. The recovery phase provides opportunities to review, reset and transform the UK's prospects for the decades to come.

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