Why living in the future, rather than the past, is key to coping with lockdowns – new research
14 December 2020, by Jane Ogden and Amelia Dennis

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a tough year for people across the globe, with billions facing at least one lockdown. And it's not over—there may be further lockdowns needed in the new year. Luckily, researchers have been busy studying what effect they have—and how best to cope.

Lockdowns are stressful because they create uncertainty, fear and social isolation. Because the present becomes anxious and boring, and the future becomes elusive (when will this end?), many people cope by looking back in time and recalling memories of things that we used to be able to do. Now our new study, due to be published in The Journal of Positive Psychology, has found that this often fails to make us feel better.

Feelings of nostalgia may work for some. But our study indicates that those who were asked to think about their best possible self in the future and those who considered what they were grateful for in the present reported feeling more socially connected to others compared to those who focused on the past and thought about a nostalgic memory. Those participants who focused on the future also reported an increase in positive feelings compared to those who thought about the past.

Feelings of nostalgia may work for some. But our study indicates that people may feel a sense of loss when they compare a wonderful past with a highly uncertain present. This then has negative impact on our wellbeing. In contrast, finding the positives in the present through gratitude for the things we are still able to do or inducing a sense of optimism...
about the future may be a better coping response. These findings reflect idioms central to our language. We are often told "be grateful for small mercies," "count our blessings" or "find pleasure in the small things in life" to gain perspective. "Giving thanks" is also core to many religions. These phrases all reflect the emphasis on gratitude and the need to focus on the benefits to be found in the here and now.

Likewise, phrases such as "this too shall pass" and "there's a light at the end of the tunnel" emphasize the importance of future thinking while terms such as "stuck in the past," or "Move on!" reflect the negative impact that rumination can have.

Future lockdowns

The first lockdown was difficult to manage and created uncertainty and a loss of social interaction. But it was novel and it felt as if we were all in it together. It also seemed to be time limited as most of us were optimistic that this worldwide pandemic would be over by the summer. Plus, in the UK, we had the best spring on record, the sun shone and we took pleasure in getting out whenever we could.

Feeling grateful for what we had was relatively easy for those of us able to work from home, with a garden to sit in or tender and new box sets to while away the evenings. Looking to the future was possible when we naively felt that that future wasn't that far away.

But the second lockdown was different (November). Gratitude requires finding benefit in the here and now but in November the days were wet and dark. More seriously, many people had lost their loved ones and their livelihoods—making it much harder task to give thanks. Similarly, focusing on the future also seems more problematic when the end is not really in sight—the lockdown could have been extended, and there may be be another one soon. Many of us have since come out into a world of tough restrictions that pretty much add up to a lockdown anyway.

But humans are resourceful and the wonderful news of a vaccine is already being grabbed to hang our hopes on. So if you find yourself in lockdown again in the new year, keep this mind—it will be a matter of months before a significant number of people have been vaccinated. All you have to do is think about what to do next. Clearly, this too shall pass.

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