

The Reflective Period of the Pandemic led Society to resort to methods of Spirituality and Mindfulness.

The underappreciated positive impact that contemplative practices had on mental health.

In 2020 when reality settled in, the prospect of everyone living in isolation and a clear juxtaposition of normal life ignited fear and instantly jeopardised those with previously existing mental health issues or provoked anxiety in even the most level headed of individuals. Observing that the same organisation that declared the pandemic provided mental health guidance by encouraging an avoidance of dependency on drugs and alcohol was a striking statement that shed light on the magnitude of struggles that were foreshadowed¹. The isolated setting of lockdown forced members of the population to look into alternative methods to cope and deal with their own thoughts and emotions.

The outbreak of Covid and the lockdown measures impacted society's mental landscape instantly by altering everyone's ways of thinking and how to manoeuvre a livelihood with such intense restrictions. Lack of social life leads to a stigma around basic communication inducing fear and nervousness towards engagement with any kind of community for many thus leading to many people reflecting on their own lives and existence with nothing else to ponder over.

There can be seen a contrast of coping strategies between those who previously experienced isolation in some form and those who did not. Previous offender and prisoner Romando Valeroso

¹ World Health Organization, *Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations during the COVID-19 Outbreak* (World Health Organization, 2020).

had gathered that his existing experience with isolation led to him prioritising his time with faith and religion putting his efforts towards prayer stating ‘it gave me purpose, clarity and gave me peace of mind to do that’². Many members of society thrived on external company and connection with others to an extent that the lockdown left them in pursuit of some form of replacement that filled the void of purpose and motivation. Museum assistant Isabelle Keenan whom I discussed quarantine measures with expressed a need to analyse her own life when all she valued was removed by the lockdown scheme, this time period provoked an awakening in her where she could recognise a dissatisfaction with her day to day existence saying ‘I felt like I needed a deeper purpose spiritually and I need to look into myself’³. Surveys conducted periodically over the last 20 years display a rise of alternative medicine or therapeutic methods of dealing with wellness and vitality that leans towards more of a lifestyle based and spiritual means of mental health contentment⁴.

Lockdown measures impacted mental health as a general term on many different levels, for many people struggling it was near impossible to observe any positive attributes from the entire ordeal. Human instinct plays on the idea of restrictions in the way that when we are told we cannot have something it makes us want it even more, the physical interaction that suddenly became illegal was a firm desire for many. Restrictions meant that physical interaction was not an option but with the aid of modern technology, communication was still thriving and was clung to by society to keep our mental health intact to some degree. One perspective sheds light on how the

² Kristin Hass, *Being Human during COVID*, University of Michigan Press, 2021.

³ Isabelle Keenan, interviewed by Cillian Brennan, (Wicklow, 28 January, 2023).

⁴ Nadeem Esmail, ‘Use of Complementary and Alternative Therapies’ *Complementary and Alternative Medicine: Use and Public Attitudes 1997, 2006, and 2016*, (Fraser Institute, 2017) pp. 17–39.

pandemic made our society more close knit and community was more important than ever and many were more honest and emotional than they had been in previous times. After a conversation with psychology student Rose Gilmartin, her perspective painted an interesting picture of how when we suddenly had time to ourselves and nothing else we could reflect on what our lives pre pandemic consisted of. When we were forced to analyse our own existence, certain questions came to mind such as if we were truly happy or were our motivations and personal goals on a correct path. In Rose's own words 'it did make us revisit how we look at life, how we deal with things, our perspective of what's important and not important', a certain calmness and lack of interruption gave us a clear and somewhat important understanding of who we were and where we were on our journey through life⁵. The reflective approach to lockdown and acknowledging it as something that could be beneficial was available to those who were able to embrace the passivity of the situation. Factors that were responsible for the pandemic's existence were out of our hands but were a reaction to anthropogenic activity. The human species paid the price for the inability to keep the virus contained, a reminder was sent around to us all that environmental issues could not be combatted and repercussions are not avoidable. Isolation was bestowed on us all when the earth figuratively sent us to our bedrooms to think about our behaviour. Rose's opinion on this was that 'Covid taught us we are not necessarily in control of everything in the world around us and we like to think in the 21st century that we are but nature has the last word'⁶.

During the pandemic there could not have been a better time to become in tune with mindfulness and using peaceful meditation to navigate the situation at hand. The intricate nature of lockdown

⁵ Rose Gilmartin, interviewed by Cillian Brennan, (Dublin, 24 February, 2023).

⁶ Rose Gilmartin, interviewed by Cillian Brennan, (Dublin, 24 February, 2023).

induced a lot of stress and frustration that was hard to express. Contemplative practices were the answer for many to keep level headedness in place over the span of lockdowns. In order to analyse the effectiveness of spiritual practices we can observe a conducted experiment in which 30 employees who worked in a stressful environment were subject to meditative sessions on a controlled regular basis and overtime and eventually possessed clear improvements of energy levels and mindfulness and therefore fulfilled their roles more efficiently⁷. Dedication to the connection of contemplative practices seemed to be a worthy activity during the pandemic especially due to the longevity of lockdown. Activities such as mantra meditation for example for extended periods of time are shown to have a correlation with healing towards mental and physical illness. Continuous practice was put to the test when 30 adults living in New York practising regulated Ananda Marga spirituality had their symptoms measured via the quality of life index and displayed an overall improvement in quality of life psychologically and spiritually⁸. Those struggling in lockdown found this new relationship with mindfulness supportive as a goal or strive to improve on and was a quality that could be benefited from in a broad context.

The situation at hand during the pandemic was of extremely large magnitude but from the public's perspective we could not witness first hand the state of emergency that was responsible for our collective isolation. News media was the lens into the extremity taking place on a global scale. Taking a step back and observing the crisis, the approach to lockdown could be used to

⁷ Ned Hartfiel, 'The Effectiveness of Yoga for the Improvement of Well-Being and Resilience to Stress in the Workplace' *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 37 (2011), 70–76.

⁸ F Isil Bilican, 'The Relationship Between Focused Attention Meditation Practice Habits, Psychological Symptoms, and Quality of Life' *Journal of Religion and Health*, 55 (2016), 80–95.

understand ourselves better. The system as we know it was shut down and this unveiled a clear picture of how we interact with society and gave an awareness of the role we played in civilisation. As well as this time being an opportunity to look into ourselves, this also was an avenue to examine the possibility of society being subject to reform. The link between spiritual practices and the earth's energy could give the perception that nature was trying to let us know that some kind of reorder should be taking place⁹. A percentage of the population that possessed open mindedness saw the pandemic as our planet communicating with us directly. The impact on our lives was a repercussion that let society know that environmental issues and scientific evidence are factors that can truly determine our entire existence. This message ensured a positive healing relationship between mankind and the planet that could be accelerated through

⁹ Carlos De Bourbon de Parme, *Nothing in Excess: Re-Evaluating Nature, the Economy and Life Post Corona*, Open Press, 7-9.

spiritual and contemplative practices.



There was a strange claustrophobic sensation that kicked in once the population were of the realisation that lockdown was going to be a measure that would take time and was going to be an unfortunate reality for an extended period. The anxiety that was a catalyst of people's uncertainty about the situation was extremely difficult to navigate for many. There was support stemming from a sector of people that took a rational approach to lockdown that were able to find contentment from within themselves. I understood after talking with RTE yoga specialist Sylvia Ferguson how so many members of the public were confident that there was a light at the end of the tunnel during the pandemic and we would make it to the other side, in Sylvia's words 'people

who have a supportive contemplative practice seem to have this innate understanding that things in life will eb and flow'¹⁰. A key to navigating a stressful time is to approach the situation by being calm and composed. An unfortunate reality is how unhealthy vices were used by many to escape their own headspaces. Particularly Irish culture tends to avoid addressing our arguably problematic relationship to alcohol, during lockdown this was magnified by the extreme collective desire to be able to socialise in an environment where drunkenness was facilitated. Sylvia's thoughts on Irish nightlife were that she 'would like to see a little more self awareness and a little more waking up and a little more thoughtfulness about the language that we use in Ireland around alcohol'¹¹.

Pre-pandemic, on a global scale the prioritisation of mental health has improved over the past decade however not enough in a way that we cannot notice a severe neglect¹². Social media enabled a discussion of mental health during the pandemic when people were vulnerable and the lack of physical interaction made it easier for people to express their true feelings. Clear patterns and implications over the course of the pandemic proved a need for an investment in holistic approaches that concern mental health and wellbeing. A lack of anticipation in relation to lockdown not only deteriorated mental health of many but prohibited normal methods of healing and rehabilitation that are available under regular circumstances. In times of desperation, contemplative practises were the only options available to express emotionally and release the negativity they felt as a result of the pandemic or whatever issue was still present. It became

¹⁰ Sylvia Ferguson, interviewed by Cillian Brennan, (Dublin, 7 March, 2023).

¹¹ Sylvia Ferguson, interviewed by Cillian Brennan, (Dublin, 7 March, 2023).

¹² Faraaz Mahomed, 'Addressing the Problem of Severe Underinvestment in Mental Health and Well-Being from a Human Rights Perspective' *Health and Human Rights*, 22 (2020), 35–50.

essential to rely on oneself and not others for comfort and ease, it was a mission for many people to learn to soothe their own selves by engaging with their own sensations making a connection through natural elements for therapeutic reasons. In many ways mankind was issued to resort to ancient methods to feel catharsis.

From conversations about prioritising the public's mental health during lockdown, I was explained to by astrologist and energy healer Mariana Saad that many working in the field of astrology felt compelled to embrace their gift of healing qualities for those who were struggling at this time. All of a sudden for those working one on one with clients instantly saw a great number of people on antidepressants, clients were not just seeking out energy healing for curiosity but out of desperation and some way to let their mind settle¹³. Mariana said 'I knew they didn't want to just discuss their chart and what's coming in terms of work, they wanted to relax, they wanted to understand the cycles of the moon just to feel something'¹⁴. There was a new demand for services based in energy healing leading to communities where people could connect with each other and nature in order to spend their time wisely and improve their wellbeing. There was people who were already familiar with contemplative practises and healing as well as those who discovered it's resourceful abilities whilst being in lockdown, social groups advocated for more of an engagement with energy healing because there was time and space for it, as said by Mariana there was 'a reflection of spirituality and meditation because they had time to themselves and self reflected'. A wave of people stuck in lockdown were able to improve on their relationship with themselves and discover their true inner self with the help of

¹³ Mariana Saad, interviewed by Cillian Brennan, (Dublin, 21 March, 2023).

¹⁴ Mariana Saad, interviewed by Cillian Brennan, (Dublin, 21 March, 2023).

contemplative practices.



A revival of mindfulness and spiritual connections was a useful and positive resurgence that came to be over the course of the many lockdowns during the pandemic. Thousands became

acquainted with being able to find solace in themselves and therefore became more independent and able to navigate thoughts and feelings no matter how strenuous the situation.

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