

The Hidden Face of Quarantine

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Ever since the Novel Corona Virus first appeared in the human race in the Chinese city of Wuhan, new words such as “quarantine”, “doubling rate”, and “lockdown” as well as new phrases such as “flattening the curve” and “social distancing” have entered public consciousness. Of these, quarantine is arguably the most feared and detested measure around the world and is very often, associated with mental health problems.

Quarantine is conventionally defined as the separation and restriction of movement of people who have potentially been exposed to a contagious disease to ascertain if they become unwell, so reducing the risk of them infecting others¹. Previous research indicates that quarantine is often an unpleasant experience for those who undergo it. Separation from loved ones, the loss of freedom, uncertainty over disease status, and boredom can, on occasion, create dramatic effects. The most tragic outcome of mental health problems, that is, suicide has also been reported,² substantial anger generated, and lawsuits brought³ following the imposition of quarantine in previous outbreaks around the world.

Does quarantine have an altogether different facet which is most often ignored in researches carried out all over the world? Could it have a positive outcome on the individual who endures it? This is an important question that needs to be answered in the backdrop of the fact that the Novel Corona Virus continues its almost effortless spread across the globe with 9.4 million people infected by it around the world as on June 25, 2020⁴. It is a stark reality that in the coming weeks and months, increasing numbers of health professionals, their loved ones, friends and neighbors would have to be quarantined for coming in contact with a carrier of the virus.

This positive aspect of quarantine was revealed to me by one of my senior colleagues who had to undergo a 14 day quarantine after returning back home from the

U.S. I called her up soon after her quarantine period was over to enquire of her well being even as I was fully prepared to listen to her travails of loneliness bordering on hopelessness and worthlessness. I rehearsed silently the words of solace and reassurance that I would speak in response. I was utterly surprised to hear from her that quarantine had left her invigorated and that she felt energized like never before. She went on to say that the forced social disconnection had indeed done a world of good. She felt more at peace with herself. She could introspect more clearly and more objectively. She also confessed that she had listened to the Mother Nature’s conversations after decades! The arrogant sound of the distant thunder, the nonchalant noise of the wind, the all too melodious music of the rain reaching a crescendo as if directed to do so in a symphony..... these sounds had almost got lost in the din of the everyday grind! She managed to read her favorite Charles Dickens novel, Robert Frost’s poem and Elton John’s song and found new meanings hidden in them! Regular Exercise had made her feel lighter and healthier.

The only red herring, according to her was the suspicious glances of the neighbors, the avoidance of even the cursory exchange of pleasantries from a safe distance ostensibly due to the stigma associated with COVID-19. This stigma stems from the bombardment of information on the media ranging from accurate to exaggerated to grossly inaccurate reporting of the pandemic⁵.

“Quarantine, after all, is not a bad word, isn’t it?” she remarked. This experiential account deserves to be shared owing to its infectious enthusiasm, overwhelming optimism and indomitable spirit. My faith in the sheer audacity of hope and resilience of mankind stood reinforced like never before!

The effect on one’s mental health depends on how one takes the period of quarantine. One must remember

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that the negative emotions reported around the world are also for real. The challenge lies in creating a window of positive cognition and emotions even when surrounded by the darkness of quarantine, just as this colleague of mine managed to do.

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