

Lockdown Dialogues 3 December 2020

An exceptional year has left people tired but not without hope

The last Lockdown Dialogues of the year brought more than 200 people together to discuss their experiences and feelings at the end of an exceptional year.

The participants included young and working age people as well as pensioners; employees of the central government, municipalities, companies and universities; and immigrants, parish members, cultural professionals and NGO actors.

In addition, a number of international discussions were organised, with participants from different European countries and beyond. The dialogues took place in three languages: Finnish, Swedish and English.

Spending Christmas amidst a coronavirus pandemic raises conflicting feelings

The changing seasons have a strong impact on Finnish people's lives. Summer, Christmas and other highlights of the year carry a high emotional charge. In emergency conditions, such milestones as summer and Christmas holidays also help people structure time in an unpredictable situation. A spring marked by the crisis was followed by a summer that brought some relief, but Christmas is associated with conflicting feelings this year.

Christmas exacerbates the sadness of being separated from loved ones and feelings loneliness. Dialogue participants also puzzle over a number of questions related to celebrating Christmas: Can my family members who live abroad come to Finland? Can I travel to my home country? Will the kids have a good Christmas? Can I visit my grandparents? What will Christmas be like in nursing homes where no visits are allowed? The risk of catching and passing on the infection is omnipresent.

At the same time, participants notice that as the commercial aspects of Christmas fade into the background, it is easier to focus on what is important. Christmas is an opportunity to pause after a difficult year: you can listen to yourself and to silence, and there is less need for hustle and bustle. Rather than changing the message of Christmas, this situation perhaps even puts it centre stage. Spending Christmas amidst a coronavirus pandemic also offers an opportunity to look at your Christmas traditions and think about which ones are valuable and worth preserving, and what could be done differently.

"Christmas during a pandemic shows or clarifies that which is important to us about Christmas. (1)

Bubbles get even smaller

As a result of the epidemic and new restrictions, people carefully select those who they meet. Relationships with people close to you and especially those living in the same household with you intensify.

There are fewer social encounters at work and in recreational groups, which affects the well-being of people living alone, in particular. Remote work has also changed the meaning of the home. For

some, it has become less of a place of rest and more of a stressful workplace, whereas others say that a life revolving around the home brings them joy.

Some participants have noticed that polarisation in societal discussions is more pronounced. For example, this can be seen in debates about vaccines and as mistrust in the way other people choose to follow the instructions.

At worst, being stuck in our personal bubbles means that we do not have sufficient understanding for each other's different situations and challenges. Participants also wonder if digitalisation dilutes human interaction, affecting the experience of shared humanity.

"Right now we have to hold on to everyone." (2)

People grow tired but hope stays alive

"We miss out on a lot when we cannot meet face to face." (3)

As the year approaches its end, people are tired. Young people find it difficult to cope with isolation, and many groups of youngsters get together despite the risks. At the same time, some young people stick to their digital devices and hardly leave their homes.

Distance learning puts the well-being of many students at test. Interaction in remote work also creates challenges and misunderstandings. When you cannot socialise with your co-workers, work seems to consist of just executing tasks, and no new ideas come up. Supervisors are burdened by the conflicting pressures and expectations placed on them.

Whatever their feelings, however, people keep dragging themselves forward, even in the depths of winter darkness. While the yearning to be with other people, chat with co-workers in the corridors and share laughter with friends is overpowering, people have not lost all hope. Right now we are struggling, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

This journey has also given us unexpected experiences of closeness and community spirit, shaken up our accustomed roles, given rise to unprejudiced proposals and radical utopias, and created a new type of trust. These are riches we can also enjoy once the emergency conditions are over.

Above all, the pandemic has made participants aware of how important social encounters, other people and communities are. At best, this insight can also reinforce empathy and communality in the post-coronavirus period.

"We will come out stronger after the crisis." (4)

Facts about the dialogues

- Number of dialogues: 27
- Number of participants: 210
- Locations: Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Helsinki, Istanbul, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kerava, Kotka, Kuopio, London, Oulu, Tallinn, Tampere, Turku and locations around Finland, Croatia and Jordan via remote connections.

Discussion organisers who submitted a synopsis (references to the quotations in parentheses): Creve 2.0, Dialogue Academy/Aretai Oy, Finnish Pensioners' Federation (2), Central

Association of Finnish Pensioners, Timeout Foundation (2 dialogues), Hanaholmen, Helsinki City Museum, Helsinki Cathedral Parish/Dialogues of Hope (1), University of Eastern Finland/Centre for Continuous Learning, UN Association of Jyväskylä, City of Kotka & Kotka-Kymi Parish & Koskenrinneyhdistys Association's Kotona täälläkin project, Finnish National Agency for Education (4 dialogues), Finnish Cultural and Academic Institutes (2 dialogues), UN Youth of Finland, Maija Vähämäki/Turku School of Economics (3), Tainionvirta Parish, Turku Cathedral Parish, Ministry of Finance, Youthwork for Resilience training programme (5 dialogues) (4).