

Lockdown Dialogues 16 March 2021

Restrictions continue and a new normal emerges

The spring's first Lockdown Dialogues took place in mid-March, marking 12 months since the coronavirus epidemic took hold in Finland.

This time, too, the discussions involved people of different age groups from across the country: participants from secondary school and higher education, pensioners, entrepreneurs, local government employees, managers, members of associations, family members of people with a mental health condition, events industry representatives, and cultural sector professionals.

The dialogues revealed that many people were already used to an ongoing lockdown. Perseverance takes us forward in the monotony of our daily lives. At the same time, people's relationships and the groups and communities they are part of have settled into a new normal shaped by the pandemic and the related restrictions.

Although everyone is still affected by the lockdown, there are significant differences in the experiences of different groups of people. In addition to the general themes, this summary describes the experiences of lockdown especially from the viewpoint of young people, their parents, students, people in different positions in working life and people living in vulnerable situations.

People have got used to lockdown

"When all this began, it was about preparations and being on a war footing, but the situation has gradually become just part of normal life." (1)

The past year hasn't been easy. Last spring's dialogues had a crisis feel about them, and then in the autumn the mood was one of fatigue. Now, many of the participants are saying that a new normal has taken hold under the pandemic. Over time, people have learned to be patient and to accept the situation. And to discover hope in the minor moments of everyday life, in interacting with others, and in empathy and caring.

For some, it has been a year of stagnation and loneliness. The disappearance of work, hobbies and human contacts may have brought life to a standstill. For others the year has been busier than ever, with barely any time to themselves.

The common thread in the experiences of dialogue participants of different ages and backgrounds is the monotony and dullness of everyday life. The lack of uplifting moments, festivities and events seems a heavy burden. There is less joy in everyday life than before the pandemic. Many participants also noted that the constant talk of concerns also increased the level of anxiety.

"Those funny moments when you just can't stop laughing haven't really come up this past year." (2)

Different forms of communities and groups have emerged

The pandemic has forced people and society to organise in new ways. During the year, contacts between people have taken on a new form which, based on the views of dialogue participants, appears so far to have become fairly permanent.

When things we took for granted such as meetings and gatherings have been forbidden, new ways of getting together and of getting things done have emerged. Families meet up virtually, work is done remotely and dance lessons are attended online.

Many people feel that connections with their own family and close circle of friends have become closer. But at the same time, new connections have not been made. Life has lacked random, unexpected encounters and it has been difficult to make new acquaintances.

The most vulnerable of all are people without close networks of contacts. There is concern that this group has grown among those for whom the lockdown has severed the opportunities to interact and engage with others. What will become of them when the pandemic is over?

“People doing well will manage, but those who weren’t doing well even before the pandemic will continue to do worse.” (3)

Young people’s relationships with friends and family have become closer but their circles of contacts have shrunk

Young people of school age who took part in the dialogues reported that the amount of time spent with their families has increased. This has both improved and strained family relations. Because of the restrictions, it has not been possible to meet grandparents or other older relatives, which has been disappointing to many young people.

Restrictions have also limited exercise and hobbies. As a result of distance learning, interaction has significantly decreased and the sense of togetherness in the classroom and in schools has weakened. Circles of friends have shrunk, and contacts have been limited to best friends.

“It’s also important to deal with different types of people.” (4)

Turning to the parental point of view, participants noted that family members have learned a lot about each other and about being a family, and that families have done new things together, but they have also argued about limits and what young people can do with their friends. Homes have experienced all kinds of turmoil due to young people or parents needing their own space and to have time to themselves.

Parents have also been thinking about the impact of the virus on the lives of young people. A couple of years is a long time in a young person's life, and the formative years can't be relived.

"Milestones are not marked and celebrations not held, which is sad." (5)

Students suffer from loss of routines and contacts

Many students have been studying through distance learning for the entire pandemic. Studying, that is, without the other things that normally go with it, such as getting to know new people, having fun and taking part in traditions and rituals. Students have been weighed down by uncertainty and fatigue, and it has also been difficult to find places offering on-the-job training. Distance learning has been problematic particularly in vocational education and training, as it is not possible to learn all skills and tasks online.

Distance learning has also blurred the patterns of everyday routines. The effects of this will become visible not only in learning achievements but in life in general. Continuously sitting down can bring physical discomfort or pain, but mental health is most at risk. Asking for help was felt to be difficult though, and the idea of remote therapy seemed dispiriting. On the other hand, genuine meet-ups, however small, help with coping.

"It's boring, as though life is on hold, like being in a waiting room." (6)

Many different dividing lines in working life

The pandemic has changed the nature of many jobs. The dialogue participants felt that the main dividing line at work is still the one that separates remote working from the physical workplace. Some people who work remotely feel privileged to be able to work from a second home, for example.

Dividing lines may also be internal to the workplace if tensions are created between those working remotely and those at the workplace. The dialogue participants felt that even those doing remote work are not treated equally. For some, remote working has brought a looser and more relaxed feel, while for others it means a huge workload and a hurried pace.

"People are in very different positions at work." (7)

People doing remote work are nevertheless expecting to return to the workplace or to a hybrid form of working, as remote working reduces all interaction to that which revolves around the very core of the work. Remote working makes it more difficult for managers to support their employees, and the rituals and encounters that people enjoy at work are not possible. Many of those who have started a new job have not met their colleagues at all

face to face, and familiarisation with the workplace is weak. Those who leave work or retire do not get a proper send-off, which many find particularly unfortunate.

Many professionals, both in the public and private sector, worry about the disappearance of customers and whether they will eventually return. Associations fear the loss of members when operations have had to be cut back. On the other hand, in many workplaces the lockdown and remote working have freed up time for developing existing work and new activities. Some participants, however, were concerned about whether people will still remember how to work under normal conditions after having been doing remote work and dealing with smaller numbers of customers.

“How long can we live under this stress and strain – will events be held or not?” (8)

Great concern was expressed about the cultural and event sectors. Dialogue participants from the event sector have had to endure enormous uncertainty. Much of the work has decreased significantly or stopped entirely. First, all events were cancelled and now plans are being made in a situation of uncertainty, because there is no confidence that the plans will be implemented.

Financial worries also figure prominently, as the future of the sector as a whole is unclear. Many people are concerned about whether events will attract sufficient customers after the pandemic, and whether there will still be enough skilled and talented people left. The extensive impact of different events is not always understood: the impact extends to those involved and attending, and volunteers too, as well as the vitality of an entire area. On the other hand, there is an optimism that when all this is over, people may have an even greater urge to be part of these events.

“I can see a ray of hope when it comes to the autumn and beyond.” (8)

Families of most vulnerable weigh the risks

Dialogue participants were concerned about family members and relatives who are particularly vulnerable due to age, disability or illness, for example. People are like plants without water if they don't have others to contact. For many who are isolated, the fear was expressed that a lack of human contact might be hugely detrimental. Many people wondered how to balance different risks, because meeting other people supports wellbeing, but meeting up also means constantly thinking about your own safety and that of others. In the case of older people, the restrictions on meeting have been clear, but they do not want to be left alone either. Respecting the wishes of elderly people was also felt to be important.

“Grandma said she would rather die from coronavirus than from loneliness.” (5)

Family members of people with a mental health condition were greatly concerned about loved ones whom they have not been physically able to meet due to the restrictions. People with a mental health condition have been burdened with thoughts of the coronavirus and the restrictions at the same time as being affected by a reduction in treatment contacts and forms of support. Loneliness aggravates psychological problems. In addition, people with a mental health condition do not always understand why a family member is not able to visit them.

Will lessons of lockdown be carried forward?

During the past year we have experienced a sense of community and of the shared importance of our actions, and have also argued about restrictions and pointed blame at others. There is hope for the future in our experiences of empathy and seeing things from other people's viewpoints. Our different experiences as individuals have been recognised and loneliness has been discussed more than ever. The pandemic has been both a period that separates people and unites them.

“When all this is behind us one day, we mustn't forget all the good things that it generated.” (9)

Many people were already thinking ahead about how we can live after the lockdown and dare to do things again. What support should be given to young people, and how should we get back to the traditions that have been put on hold? How do we establish connections to the lonely and to older people? Questions related to housing, mobility and consumption in the future were also discussed. Two issues in particular emerged: How will the world change as a result of the pandemic? What if we haven't learnt anything and nothing changes?

“A continuous process of learning, development and renewal is under way worldwide.” (10)

Continuing need for discussion

The general need to discuss things has not diminished over the past year. People still have a great desire to meet others and share their experiences of life under lockdown. Many people felt very relieved when they noticed that others were thinking about the same issues and addressing common concerns. Sharing similar experiences and gaining new insights bring us joy and hope.

“Sharing creates insights and awareness of perspectives and helps to create hope and confidence that we will cope and get through this.” (2)

Dialogue participants also felt there was an increase in understanding and compassion when the discussion focused on people's different situations and backgrounds and the

challenges they face. But many challenges still lie ahead, which is why dialogue will still be needed after the lockdown is over.

“The world needs more dialogue.” (11)

Facts about the dialogues

- Number of dialogues: 26
- Number of participants: 242
- Locations: Espoo, Helsinki, Lahti, Lappeenranta, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kauniainen, Kerava, Kuopio, Mikkeli, Porvoo, Ruokolahti, Tampere, Turku, Tuusula, Vantaa and virtual connections across Finland.
- Discussion organisers who submitted a synopsis (references to the quotations in brackets): Dialogue Academy (1), Dialogue Academy & Siviis Study Centre, Timeout Foundation (9), Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (2 dialogues), Finnish Central Association of Families of People with Mental Illness (FinFami), Helsinki City Museum (7), Helsinki Cathedral Parish / Hope Dialogues (5), JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Lahti City Library, City of Lahti (2 dialogues) (8), Union of Rural Education and Culture, Malmi Parish (2 dialogues), Mindful Engineering Oy / Hanna Kortejärvi (10), Committee of 100 in Finland & Peace Union of Finland, Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Parishes in Tampere (2), Municipality of Tuusula (3 dialogues) (4), Finnish Development NGOs (Fingo), Finnish Youth Institute Paukkula (6), Finnish Youth Association (3), UN Youth of Finland (11), Ministry of Finance.

The Lockdown Dialogues are coordinated overall by Dialogue Academy, Timeout Foundation, the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Finance.