

Life will never be the same after COVID-19, but that's not a bad thing

By Bethan Tolley, Communications Officer, Centre for Brexit Studies

Week three of 'lockdown' and right now, the thought of leading normal lives once again feels like it will never happen. Really simple parts of life, like going for a meal after work, or just stopping by my grandparents' house for a cup of tea, have been taken away from me, and so many of us. I think by this stage, many of us know that staying indoors is absolutely what needs to be done, and the majority of us are just trying to keep our time inside occupied.

But waking up each morning, slightly frazzled as to why I'm not running around getting ready by 7.15am so we don't hit the traffic on the way to work, to sitting around at night watching the TV, because there's nothing else to do, is taking some adjusting to get completely used to. The days are whizzing by, everything has all happened so quickly and it is all a bit...strange.

I miss my family and my friends. I miss just going out and enjoying myself. I miss walking down the street and not feeling like I'm committing a crime. But, I've also not hated it. I enjoy working from my own home, it's been nice to rediscover passions of mine which have had to take a back seat for so many years. It's also been enjoyable to just sit and watch a film, and not feel guilty about how I should be making the most out of my time. I have, so far, enjoyed the peace and quiet of it all.

And it got me thinking, that as much as I don't want to be trapped inside the four walls of my house forever, I also don't think I want to go back to absolutely every single part of life the way it was just a few short weeks ago. Don't get me wrong, I want all this to end. I don't want my family and friends who are 'key workers' to have to keep putting themselves at risk. I don't want the economy to plummet. I don't want businesses to go bump, and I don't want the constant anxiety because of the total uncertainty of what is going to happen next.

We'll be feeling the impact of this virus for decades, this will be a time in all of our lives that we will talk about for years to come, and my future children will be learning about this at school. Life is probably never really going to be the same again after COVID-19 – but that's not necessarily a bad thing. I can only hope that we all learn from this situation, and that some positive can come out of it.

Something I've realised in the last few weeks of lockdown is that, as much as I love going to restaurants and the local pub, I don't miss them. I just miss being surrounded by people I know and love. I'm not gutted that I've had to cancel all of my plans for the next few months, I'm just sad that I won't get to catch up with friends for a long time. I don't miss the commute to work, but I do miss being around my colleagues. I never realised just how wonderful human connections can be. And I think many of us have suddenly realised that too.

On a normal working day, we'd get home from work, eat tea, watch the TV for a short while and suddenly realise that it's bed time. Nowadays, I'm on 'Zoom' and 'Houseparty' with my family and friends. We're having quiz nights and daily catch ups. I'm talking to my loved ones now more than I ever have before.

In these strange times, we need each other. I don't want that feeling to ever go away again.

I'm 10 months into planning my wedding, and I've spent so long thinking about every last detail of the day, even really stupid stuff like table décor. This week, I spent some of my wedding fund on a deposit for a puppy. Because I love dogs, they bring me so much joy and after lockdown is over, I'll go and collect my puppy and enjoy life in a whole new way. It's amazing what a bit of perspective can actually do for you. Because as much as I want a wonderful wedding, I also want a dog and I'm actually more concerned about getting everyone I love in one room rather than how many vases are on a table. Table décor doesn't even seem important anymore.

I'm fortunate enough to have a whole back catalogue of amazing memories. Holidays, city breaks, fun days out. I've seen amazing sights, landmarks, eaten some of the best food in the world. But it wasn't about where I was, it was who I was with. I'll gladly swap every landmark in the world for a sit down with my mum. You can take your

expensive meals, your fancy home décor, your ridiculous cars. None of it seems to matter anymore.

I'll never take just the pure joy of seeing something funny happen in the street for granted again. A smile on a shop assistant's face, an interaction with a fellow worker on the morning train, a nod from my neighbour.

Human interaction is something all of us seem to take for granted, and it's what we all miss the most when it's taken away from us. The thing dragging us apart is also the thing that is bringing us together, closer than ever before.

Social media has been a lifeline for so many people throughout this. I'd have probably lost my mind if I didn't have Instagram to bring me some light relief, WhatsApp for group chats and Facebook to keep up to date with what my cousins are getting up to, as they stay at home rather than heading to school. But I do hope after all of this, that we learn to put the phones down and just talk to each other again.

I can't wait to hug my family members for just a few more seconds when I see them, talk to my friends more often, smile at familiar faces on train platforms. When all this is done, and we are expected to get back into our 'normal' lives of chaotic work days, expensive evenings out and trying to squeeze as much in over the weekend as possible, I hope we can do it all in a better, kinder way.

I hope we can all be more flexible with our working hours, now that so many of us have had the opportunity to find a schedule that actually works for us and our families. I hope that we spend our money with independent retailers who are so passionate about what they do. I hope we start treating people better, because life can be really tough.

But above all, I hope we start treating those who have been on the frontline throughout all this with the respect they deserve. You know, those underpaid, hard-working nurses, shop assistants, teachers, social care workers, delivery drivers – just a few months ago, they were hardly even seen as important. Now we clap on our doorsteps every Thursday night as a thank you to them. They are the real heroes here. Let's not forget that when normal life resumes.

I hope that after all the tragedy that the next few months will bring, that we can look back at this time and remember those weeks that we spent inside with our families and friends. And remember how good it felt to just sit, talk and enjoy the little things. And when we realised what was actually important in life. There is beauty to be found in going back to basics.

Because one day you're rolling your eyes at how long you've been in a queue for at ASDA, and the next there's a pandemic and you can't even leave the house. May we never take for granted again weekends spent laughing with friends and trips away with family. The sheer amount of choice of where to go for a coffee, or a pint. Football matches. Concerts. Theatre shows. Long walks across the countryside – or IKEA.

There is a good chance that life will never go back to the way it was before, but I think many of us will find immense joy within knowing that we were part of the generations that remembered how wonderful the simplicity of life can be.

As Her Majesty The Queen said: "We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return. We will be with our friends again, we will be with our families again. We will meet again."

Stay safe.