

Looking forward rather than backward safeguards wellbeing during COVID-19 lockdowns

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Practicing gratitude and looking to the future will help safeguard our mental wellbeing during future COVID-19 lockdowns, a new study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* reports.

In the first study of its kind, researchers from the University of Surrey investigated the effectiveness of three [psychological interventions](#)—nostalgia, a sentimentality for the past; [gratitude](#), recognizing the good things currently in our life; and best possible self, thinking about positive elements of the future—and how they each affect wellbeing during lockdowns. Personal characteristics such as emotion regulation (the ability to respond to and manage an [emotional experience](#)) and attachment orientations (how a person views their relationships to others) were also examined. It is believed that such traits may be an indicator of how an individual responds to lockdowns.

Investigating which intervention was the most effective, researchers worked with 216 participants who were each assigned to one of four groups, each one practicing either nostalgia, gratitude or best possible self, plus a control group.

Those practicing a nostalgic approach were instructed to think of a sentimental memory in their life that occurred before the lockdown; for gratitude, participants were encouraged to list three things that went well in their day and why this was; and for best possible self those involved were asked to think about where they imagine themselves in the future after lockdown has lifted. Those in the [control group](#) were each asked to recall the plot of a recent television or film they had viewed. Participants were then asked about their thoughts and feelings.

Researchers found that those who participated in the best possible self and gratitude interventions reported higher levels of social connectedness than those who practiced nostalgia. Those in the best possible self group were also found to experience significantly more positive emotion than those in the nostalgia group. Researchers believe that gratitude and best possible self direct attention towards positive aspects of a person's life by giving them hope and prevent individuals from dwelling on their current situation.

Amelia Dennis, a postgraduate researcher at the University of Surrey, said: "All three interventions have proven beneficial to people experiencing a difficult time in their life. However, as lockdowns have continued people have been presented with unusual challenges and many have struggled. We found that looking to the future and appreciating what is positive in our lives currently is more psychologically beneficial than reminiscing about the past.

"The current restrictions and any future lockdowns have removed our sense of control of our lives. For the sake of our wellbeing, we need to acknowledge what we do have rather than regretting what we have lost."

Participants were also surveyed on their [personal characteristics](#) regarding attachment and emotion regulation. Researchers found that those with low attachment anxiety (i.e. believe they are worthy of love) and those with lower attachment avoidance (i.e. inclined to feel others are trustworthy) were most likely to experience greater wellbeing during [lockdown](#). Those with higher emotion regulation were also found to be more resilient to their current circumstances, which protects their overall wellbeing.

Jane Ogden, Professor of Health Psychology at the University of Surrey, said: "The two lockdowns last year dramatically affected our mental and emotional [wellbeing](#) and it is likely any future ones will have the same affect. Reports of increased levels of depression and anxiety are worrying because these can negatively impact upon our physical health. It is important that we understand which psychological techniques can most benefit and support people during unsettling and difficult times."

More information: Amelia Dennis et al. Evaluating the impact of a time orientation intervention on well-being during the COVID-19 lockdown: past, present or future?, *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2020.1858335](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1858335)

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