Anxiety out of Lockdown_mixdown (3).mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah Walker [00:00:11] Hello, and welcome to Episode two of our Be Well podcast series. I hope you enjoyed our very first episode where we focused on BAME mental health. Our episode today will continue with a mental health theme. We're going to discuss coming out of lockdown and adjusting back to normal life, and I guess now our new normal and the anxiety that can bring. Joining me today I have Ceri, who is a lecturer in Psychology. Rick, head of Student Counselling Services. Helen who is, a fourth year student studying Anthropology, and Julius, who's currently studying his M.A. in International Relations and Legal Studies. A huge, warm welcome to you all and thank you so much for joining me today. So lockdown measures are starting to ease all around the world at different rates. For some, this brings much longed for opportunities, being able to see friends, play sports and even returning to campus. For others, the thought of leaving lockdown and returning to normal life is really worrying. So how do we begin to reintegrate into society again? And do you have any concerns?

Ceri [00:01:10] I was going to say I think we're often creatures of habit, so any kind of change can be quite tricky for us, and especially at the moment where lots of things are changing, a lot of the time, things are quite different to what we're used to, any sort of change can feel quite difficult, and that is quite a normal response in this type of situation.

Rick [00:01:34] I would agree, I think humans, we just don't like change. We like the status quo. We like what we know. And I think what's what's challenging about where we are at the moment is, yes, we are coming out of lockdown, but there seems to be the threat of sort of dipping in and out of further restrictions. So, things are continually changing. So we've had a few more restrictions in the central belt of Scotland recently. And it may be that that will extend further or other changes might happen. It's just trying to keep abreast of everything and understanding, well, what's going on now? It does cause anxiety. I think we're just not used to it.

Julius [00:02:17] I also would add that anxiety of the second wave is also very, very present. In France, where I live at the moment, unfortunately, we are in the middle of that second wave. And if Scotland isn't, that's great and really knock on the wood that doesn't come to that. But I think there's uncertainty if it's going to be worse again, if it's going to be longer this time and so on is incredibly bad. And it also ties in with the fact that people maybe have even the anxiety to be taking advantage of the kind of new liberty that they have coming out of lockdown because they know that meeting that friend at the pub could mean continuing the spread or could mean contracting the virus, getting infected, infecting others. So it's kind of a thing that we are not yet in the totally safe space because there is no vaccine yet. And there is no certainty that all the people that you are going to meet up with, are so happy about that freedom that was given back to you, that this is actually not going to have a negative effect on the other side. So any kind of utilising that freedom is also a risk. And the same happened with my friend, for example, who decided to stay in Brussels rather than going back to Aberdeen. And he is kind of thinking about going back to Aberdeen for the second term because he really misses the university experience. But then he doesn't know: when I get there, will this actually be the university experience or will I just be on my own? Because there will be another lockdown, because there will be maybe just one or two sessions in person on campus. So is it actually worth going back or should I rather stay in my family home, which is nice, but no university experience?

Bekah Walker [00:04:03] Yeah, I completely, completely agree with what you're saying. And I think you've made a really fair point also about the safety. That can be another thing that can induce anxiety, that maybe people fear, am I going to do the wrong thing? Am I going to do the right thing? So maybe I'll just stay in my house because I don't want to be the cause of spreading the virus to loved ones, who might potentially be at more risk than I am. So definitely you raise a fair point there with safety and the university experience, one hundred percent, definitely. It's not the same at home, and then you have the sort of fear of isolation and trying to weigh up the pros and cons.

Helen [00:04:45] I think that is a really good point as well, because people at the start of the year sort of thought, oh, by the summer time will be free, we will be able to do what we want, things will be back to normal. But now it just sort of seems like it's going to be a never ending stream of like circuit breaker lockdowns or new measures coming into place. And I think people are worried about what their impact is like you have all said, but also are trying to think carefully about what they can do to minimise the risk. But also, I think people are starting to get a bit fed up now of the regulations and what you've been saying before, there have been people that have been sort of pushing it a bit, which is definitely going to cause more problems.

Ceri [00:05:31] Yeah, I completely agree. It's partly there's just so much for us to think about at the moment with all the rules and all the changes and our brains make us want to try and predict what's going to happen next, especially if we're feeling anxious. So we're using up so much head space on all these extra things. And that's really tiring in itself and just makes us all feel quite unsettled, I think. And also, like you say, also mixed feelings, people getting fed up with all the rules and restrictions too.

Rick [00:06:05] And I find it while the changes in terms of restrictions shift all the time, I think there is quite a lot of social anxiety that is going on out there. So I think particularly when we've come out of full lockdown and are in a sort of a semi lockdown, I remember going to the shops after lockdown and thinking 'oh my gosh, there are real people out there!' But it was funny because I saw, you know, obviously we had masks on, but people tend to sort of look away. You almost pass each other back to back in a very weird kind of way. We don't normally do that. And normally, you know, I live rurally and you'd probably just smile to the person next to you. But there seems to be a sort of a disconnect that was happening. And I think that's very alien to us as well.

Julius [00:06:55] One observation that I made about this mask wearing thing is that in the first couple of weeks, I always felt like everyone is so focused on their own thing and everyone is looking grim and and kind of grumpy. And it is true that definitely I don't want to claim that facial communication is not essential, or seeing someone's face completely. But what I want to say, on the other hand side is the observation that I made that actually seeing if someone is actually smiling at you is visible in the eyes. So I kind of became more aware that it's not necessary to see the actual mouth corners go up in order to see if that person is actually looking at you in a friendly way or not. And that, again, made me kind of more aware of nonverbal communication, made me more aware of observing people and kind of seeing if they are actually friendly with me or happy or unhappy, just looking at their eyes. So, I mean, of course, I would prefer to see someone's face, but it's just an interesting observation that I made with this with this whole mask wearing thing.

Kerry [00:08:03] Definitely. Definitely. Good point.

Helen [00:08:07] I think it's interesting as well to consider how you've said how people have been reacting to wearing masks, because I've been working in a bar which is now closed for the next two weeks. But during my time working there over the past few months, then it's been quite interesting to see the people who will come in and then not wear the mask and how annoyed they'll get about it, even although in Scotland then it's been part of the legislation for so many months already. And they just sort of say, "oh, I'll just go somewhere else". So it kind of made me worry thinking like where where are these people going that they're getting away with not wearing masks?

Bekah Walker [00:08:50] Yeah, definitely the anxiety with, you know, you can do all you are meant to do to keep yourself safe, but others potentially aren't. And that can also be really anxiety inducing as well. With us being so isolated and being at home, you kind of have only had to, like, look after yourself and keep yourself safe. But with now things opening up a little bit more freely – well they were opening, they may be stopping again - but, you know, they are always changing. You just don't know. And certainly for me personally, I would say that I'm more anxious now than what I was right at the start of lock down, because I think way back in March when, you know, lockdown came into the UK, everyone was very much aware that, you know, you're right to stay and stay inside. And I felt like the rules were much clearer. Whereas right now the guidance can be, you know, it's different from Glasgow and Aberdeen. And then like Liverpool is such that if you were even travelling through the UK, you would have to then go and look at the restrictions before you travel. Whereas before that, that never would have been the case. So for me personally, I feel like I'm actually quite a different person, kind of post-Covid than I was before. For example, like, I kind of feel that maybe my self-confidence and my confidence with communicating with people is definitely kind of declined because I've not seen people, I've not really been speaking to many people, certainly face to face. So I definitely feel that, I think we're going to come out of the Covid era into normal, normal life as as being different people. I definitely, you know, lived by a structure and a schedule, whereas right now, any thought of a schedule and my brain can't handle it, whereas before I would thrive on having a schedule and that's how I would live my life. Whereas now I kind of think, well, I'll do something like when I want to do it, not at a particular time. I don't know about you guys.

Kerry [00:10:49] I feel permanently disorientated at the moment, you know, things like getting the day of the week wrong or sometimes feeling like we're in a different time of the year than we're in, because time seems to be going in one way very fast and in another way very slowly. And again, that thing, I think at the beginning of lockdown, we all kind of knew we had to do this clearly for a set time and then we thought it would be finished. So that helped us manage the anxiety. And now we're realising there isn't going to be a set point at the moment, you know, that we're clear when it finishes. So that uncertainty is, I think, making all of us feel anxious. And the only good thing, in a sense, is that lots of us are able to acknowledge more, that we are all feeling anxious. And that is a really normal, healthy reaction to what's going on.

Julius [00:11:38] I would be very interested to hear from from the BeWell team and from the Counselling Service also from you Ceri, as a Clinical Psychologists, how the kind of queries that you receive changed. And also if the amount of requests has gone up, because obviously on the one hand side counselling online is very different to in person, but also it's much less of a barrier to just click the link rather than go into an office or like a surgery and enter that house physically. So I would be interested in that. But maybe before that I wanted to bring in a more positive note with regards to the whole lockdown and everything moving online kind of thing, because for me, it really was remarkable to see

how much you can actually do online. I have joined an organisation. I have done a project with regards to two elections in the municipality and concerning EU citizens participation in that. And with both that project and that organisation that I joined, I have never met any person ever in person. But somehow I feel so connected to these people because of hours of Zoom calls. And I kind of really a friendship has developed without having ever seen that person physically. And that is maybe also an individual thing. There is people who need that physical presence. So this is something important to say. But for me, it was surprising to see how you could ever feel so connected to someone that you've only seen on the screen. I mean, this could be an animated character technically, but it wasn't, obviously. And the second point also is with regards to everything moving online, there is so many opportunities. At 9am I can join an event in London, at 11 a.m. I can talk to my friend from Malta at three pm. I can join an event in Madrid, but also in the evening I could join the lunchtime event in New York. So the kind of possibilities that this online world has is remarkable, are endless. And for me personally, it was a very positive experience to see how much can be done online. I also noticed that a remote study or like an online university would be an option for me. The only thing is and this is what I definitely need too, because I'm not someone who doesn't meet people physically is the possibility to meet people physically and to travel also to meet friends that I have abroad. And this is something that's affecting me personally, because I do have a lot of friends in other countries and I love to travel and I can't do that at the moment. But with regards to learning and joining different events, maybe joining even an organisation, doing projects together, what we can do, thanks to digitalisation, is really remarkable. And with all the sadness and with all the uncertainty that comes in, I think if possible, especially those people struggling with that, should try to take advantage of those new things that the online world can bring to them and that could maybe help overcome the more negative sides of the whole situation.

Rick [00:14:57] I think that's a really good point Julius. It's almost kind of looking at the opportunities where things can be done differently or better and at the small light at the end of the tunnel. I think, interestingly, from a Counselling point of view, traditionally the most common presenting issues to our service, tend to centre around anxiety issues, low mood, depression and probably relationship issues, so I wouldn't say that they have unduly changed, although I think we're feeling people are more isolated now because of the self isolation that a lot of people have had to go through. But a couple of observations that I've picked up over the last bit, and I think particularly using audio visual communication, is there's been a sort of a disinhibition effect. So rather than somebody coming to our office and they're thinking, well, I haven't been here before, this is a bit new, I'm feeling a bit anxious, actually we're seeing them in their home now or in their accommodation. And they can also see us in our homes. And I think rather than being the professional, we are somebody who's also working from home. So theres an equalness. There's more of an equalness for that. I think people are also a bit more open and, as you were saying Julius, just really pressing the button and you're already there. So there's there's that kind of equalness. The other point I was going to mention is something about tolerating ambiguity. So the changes are changing and we need that stability. So if we're better able to tolerate the ambiguity, we can accept it a lot more. And so it's something about an acceptance strategy to accept that things are changing all the time. One of one of my work colleagues was having a lot of problems with her computer and Internet connection, and it was driving her crazy. She was relying so much on this technology and yet it wasn't working properly and it was really causing a lot of frustration. But she came to the conclusion that, well, you know what, I'm going to have these IT blips quite frequently because that's the way it's been. And I'm just going to accept that this is going to happen. So I'm not going to get frustrated. I'm not going to get angry with my computer. I'm not

going to throw it out the window. I'm just going to accept that these things happen. And already she was a lot better able to deal with that situation.

Ceri [00:17:36] I was going to just link in with that as well to agree and say that something that I've been finding helpful for me and for working with people, along those lines of accepting, is that idea of kind of using 'change accept, let go. So is this something I can change? Is this something that's in my control? I've been spending a lot of time getting angry about things I realise are not in my control at the moment. So can I change it? if I can change it. If not, try and accept it. If I can't, then try and let go and keep my energy for something else. And it's not easy to do, but sometimes having sort of ideas like that can be helpful.

Rick [00:18:18] And I think added to that, I would I would say that, yes, we can't change the situation, but we can change how we think, feel or behave. These are things that we do have control over so that we can choose to think more positively. We can act in a way that's more productive. We can manage our emotions in a different way. These are things that we can control and we do like to control things. So I'd agree with that, Ceri.

Julius [00:18:43] I would also add into that with regards to accepting the situation, I have a very close friend who just finished university in Spain. You know, Spain is incredibly affected. And, you know, that Spain hasn't been the best place for young people to find employment in the past either. So now it's even worse for new graduates to find employment. And it made her really upset and super disappointed with the world and also angry to some extent, how this virus was basically killing her professional prospect, because she's been working so hard, she got excellent grades and now it will be so hard to find an employment. And exactly those three words that you have, this 'change, accept and let it go' kind of thing, that's really important because there is - and that's what I've been trying to tell her - here is certain things which we have zero control about, zero. And this is, this is this infection rate, these are governmental restrictions, and we somehow need to work our way around. As if it's raining outside, So you're going to need to take an umbrella or you're going to get wet - that kind of mentality. And I mean, it sounds maybe too simple. And it sounds as if someone was saying it like me now is not accepting or appreciating that this is a very difficult situation. But I think looking ahead, finding a way out not to sort of just dig yourself into a hole and be sad and be anxious, we somehow have to see how we can   find a work around and then again, see the positive side, like, for example, the fact that at the moment companies are offering virtual internships. I mean, how would you have imagined to do an internship in a company in the US or in Asia where you would have had to move and maybe also have been given a work visa and so on? And now you can do this because it has been moved online. So any kind of negative thing also has a positive thing. And it's about seeing that positive thing and that positive opportunity that arises that will help people get through a phase of grief and disappointment.

Bekah Walker [00:20:58] Yeah, I absolutely agree with what you're saying. And it does just highlight that no matter kind of where you are in your life, we're all going through the same thing. It's hard for everyone, but everyone's battle is slightly different. You know, if I have a mental health illness, I might struggle in a different way from someone that doesn't have a mental health illness. Or maybe it's the first time that I maybe noticed that I might have a mental health condition, you know, maybe struggle with anxiety, where that hasn't been prominent before in someone's life, it maybe is now. And certainly at the start, the juggling of being at home like 24/7 with your children could have been really difficult, whereas some people might have really, really enjoyed that time. So I think it is just

important to highlight that everyone's struggle is different, although we are going through the same thing. It's not the same. It's not really comparable. And I think there will be a lot of people in a very similar situation to your friend who is very concerned about future prospects for their job. I can understand why they would feel that all their hard work is maybe gone to waste, that they can't find a job or they're maybe in a job, but it's not related to their degree. So it's not quite with their career goal. But I think it's important to highlight that, as you say, there are some positives. These times will change, whether it ever goes back to normal as it was before, but we will learn to evolve with it and there will be new opportunities in place for people.

Bekah Walker [00:22:39] Helen, do you want to come in with anything at all?

Helen [00:22:43] Yeah, I would agree with what you're saying. I think that there's definitely been people that will have really struggled through lockdown and like just in general with their mental health. And it is important to acknowledge that because, as you say, people will definitely have had different experiences. And I think it's also I think maybe like one of the things I've sort of been trying to help me is like I've been trying to think about plans I can make for the future that I know could happen, because it's quite difficult knowing that there's just sort of like a vast forever that coronavirus might still exist in. But if you kind of try and take control of the things that you can, then that's something that's kind of been helping me. I've been trying to think about it now that I'm in Fourth year, I'm trying to think about things that I can do online to help me get better grades and get better qualifications and even think about things that I might want to do in the future. So I've been looking at different degree programmes that I could do for Masters. So like taking control that way has sort of been helping me to not focus too much on the present, but still be aware of what's going on, obviously.

Bekah Walker [00:24:03] Yeah, absolutely. I feel like it is really important to kind of have a plan. Give yourself something to look forward to as well. You know, these times will change, we're not sure when, but it's changing constantly, things will get better and times will move. Kind of just to round up the episode, I just wanted to chat about maybe some self-help strategies that maybe people if people are anxious and they are struggling, like your top tip for struggling with anxiety. Does anyone have anything that they could share with our listeners?

Rick [00:24:40] I've got a few that I scribbled down earlier, and one of them is to kind of reassess what anxiety means to you. So it's actually understanding what is the anxiety actually about. It's also recognising that some anxiety is actually not a bad thing. It's like the good anxiety and there's destructive anxiety. I think before exams, everybody gets anxious and that's probably, to a certain degree, quite healthy because it keeps us alert and focused when we need to be alert and focused. So it's recognising that not all anxiety is bad as such. It's also looking at what the triggers are and what our responses are to that anxiety. So is it because we're going out and seeing people? So is it a social anxiety? What is the anxiety about seeing people all about?. But how do we respond to that? Do we try and get out of the situation and collude with it? Or do we try and engage and accept and work through it? I think if we're in a moment when we are feeling quite anxious, a simple breathing exercise can be very effective. And there's one called the four, seven, eight exercise, which seems to work quite well for a lot of people. So you inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for seven and then exhale slowly for eight, four, seven, eight. And that can help in the moment to reduce your heart rate, to feel a bit calmer, to feel a bit more mindful and grounded. Those are a few just thoughts from me.

Julius [00:26:25] And now here comes the advice in quotation marks from someone who is not an educated expert. For me, what helps me when I'm insecure, when I'm really down, is talking to friends. And for me, this is maybe also something easy to do because I'm personally a very open person. So I don't have problems sharing, at least with my dear friends, very personal issues. And I also don't have issues sharing that on a video call. So this is something that, again, makes it easier for someone like me to open up. But if we really try to get our head around the fact that even though it's a video call, it's still the same person and it's still the same person that listens to me, that has the same kind of emotional tie with me, even though there is one hundred kilometers, a thousand kilometers between the two of us, then I think friendships can really help you and a listening friend and maybe a friend that knows you very well usually and can maybe even give you advice, is a huge aid in overcoming an anxiety, insecurity, sadness and so on and so forth. And I think, again, this is something where, as you said, something positive about the pandemic. It's about taking the time to just call that friend. Usually there is a lot of friends that you meet every day, student colleagues, work colleagues and so on, maybe your sports colleagues. And then there is many friends where you always have to meet up by sort of setting up a date. And I'm extremely bad usually with keeping in touch with people. And I take a lot of time to text back and so on and so forth. And during the pandemic, when I realised actually I can't meet anybody right now, it came to my mind how important it actually is to keep in touch with people and to just call them and to just have a conversation and maybe two hours, maybe three hours, but also maybe just for half an hour. But to reach out to these people who are close to you and to sort of keep up the relationship. So for me, the pandemic also taught me how to better have those remote relationships that many of us have and that all of us had during the lockdown because we were not allowed to meet them physically. So talking to friends, being open about that and trying to sort of let us sight the fact that this is a screen on screen conversation rather than a physical one, I think.

Helen [00:28:54] I totally agree with you. I think it's so important to speak to your friends about how you're feeling, and it's even important as well just to be able to listen to their problems as well, because I think sometimes you're speaking through each other's problems is so helpful for both of you. Especially for me, lots of my friends are in Britain, so they're kind of going through the same experiences with lockdown and coming out of lockdown. So I think that was quite helpful, being able to speak to other people and other students as well who are also in the same place. And another thing that I found really helpful was sort of doing things, especially in lockdown, that I might not have had the chance to do otherwise. I ordered some clay off Amazon and I started making some models and stuff. So that was something that was sort of fun that I've always wanted to try and do, that I hadn't had a chance to do before. So that was an interesting thing that I did. And another thing that I did was I learnt how to make a traditional basket from my home, which is the Shetland Islands. And that's something that I've been wanting to do for years and years and years. So it was really interesting to take that time and to really learn how to do those things and to enjoy doing the small things.

Ceri [00:30:18] I suppose it's lovely to hear that. And some thoughts from me would be, I think, trying to accept that we're all on a bit of a roller coaster at the moment. So there's lots of ups and downs for everybody and in a way trying to enjoy the ups when we can, having fun connecting with people, as we've said, and then in the downs, one good thing about the downs is that we learn stuff in the difficult bits that helps us the next time we get to a difficult bit, if you like, and when we are in a difficult bit, even though it's really hard trying to be kind to ourselves. And that can sound a bit cheesy, but really thinking if you sort of hear this critical voice telling yourself off, you know, would you be friends with that

person and trying to think, what would you say if it's someone you care about in this difficult situation and just trying to be kinder to ourselves and doing little things each day that give us a break from it all, make us feel good, or make us feel relaxed, or just getting a rest from thinking about everything that's going on.

Julius [00:31:26] And one more thing that comes to my mind is really reaching out and taking advantage of the many different places that you could go to, the university has been mailing this very often, actually, and I find this excellent. And I really have to say that the University of Aberdeen is very different to other universities because I've seen emails from my sister's university, which basically contain stuff like, you know, "we are going to check your attendance in the online classes and if you don't switch your camera on we will think that you are absent", and all these things - like really like digging, like rubbing in onto that kind of anxiety thing. And the University of Aberdeen has really emphasised that there was a lot of support services available, I think like five or six different places that you can go to. And it's really important to take advantage of these services, I think. But again, this requires sort of the kind of courage to speak up and to talk to someone. And this is why I just want to say that even if it's just a friend, even if it's just a person that I know from a tutorial and that person wants to talk to me, I would be extremely honoured that that person was to open up to me. So I think for anyone who's listening and who is unsure about should I be talking to someone? Is my problem even big enough? There is people with much bigger issues than I have. No, I think emotions and feelings can never be wrong, first of all. And they can also never be sort of compared in size or significance. And that's why I think it's really important for anyone who has issues or who is maybe unhappy, that this person really knows, and we all aware that there is, first of all, a lot of places that you can go to were there for exactly those problems, even if they seem very, very small, they're exactly there for these for these problems or even friends. And that everyone who you are going to talk to is going to be very, very honoured that you open up towards that person and is going to do their best to help you. And if that is only, in quotation marks, again, if that is only listening, I think that's really, really important to be aware of how much is out there and how willing people are to make you feel better because no human, normal person likes if someone is suffering, especially not if it's someone who you're close to.

Bekah Walker [00:33:43] Yeah, I think it's really important to remember that if you are struggling and you're listening to this podcast and maybe hoping for some self-help tips that you I hope you find this useful, but it's really important to remember that you're not alone. There is support available. And the support that we've talked about on the coping mechanisms that we have chatted about during this podcast, we will share the links. So if you are struggling and you have been listening, and think that would be useful, you'll be able to click onto the resources and they'll be able to help you. So I would just like to say thank you very much to Ceri, Helen, Rick and Julius for joining me today. It's been fantastic for me to hear your experiences and get some advice from you guys as well. Thank you so much. Again to our listeners as well for tuning in. I hope you enjoyed the episode and take care and I'll see you next time.

Voiceover [00:34:34] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.