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“Seven Days in Lockdown”: A Performance Autoethnography of Physical Activity and Mental Health

David Carless

Abstract

COVID-19 increased anxiety levels worldwide. Significant mental health consequences are becoming evident across society, from children to seniors. The pandemic left millions of people out of work or unable to work. It simultaneously increased stress levels for many who remained in work. It made day-to-day life worse—much worse—for a lot of people. I was not immune to these difficulties. Yet, paradoxically, I found that lockdown also offered circumstances to support a degree of recovery or healing. This performance autoethnography draws on diary excerpts I wrote during lockdown in 2020 to explore how various forms of physical activity can help mental health. It offers an alternative perspective on a question that researchers have investigated for decades: When it comes to mental health recovery, what actually works?

Keywords

arts-based research, autoethnography, exercise, mental health, physical activity, recovery

Prologue

It’s a fear of a fear really. You’re just frightened and you don’t know why. Everything becomes out of touch. The fear is so intense it just gets a grip of you. That’s what a panic attack’s like. I can get through it sometimes. Other times I need to lay down—I can’t beat it.

These are the words of the first participant I interviewed in the first qualitative research project I conducted, over 20 years ago. Ben’s words struck me powerfully, even as he spoke them.

I did not know at the time that similar events lay in store for me. That I would come to know the truth of this aspect of Ben’s story through my own experience.

I did not know that these kinds of experiences could endure—hour after hour, day after day—not just for weeks or months, but for years.

And I didn’t yet understand that mental health is not only mental.

I did not know that the most common form of treatment can make things worse. That while some people find medication helpful, others find it exacerbates their difficulties, adding side effects and complications, offering at best short-term relief.

I did not yet know that psychotherapy might, in the process of working toward healing, entail a worsening of symptoms. I didn’t know that this might take several years to work through. And I did not want to know that, even then, after all that time, resolution might remain elusive.

I didn’t know that losing your job could—in an instant—overturn years of recovery work. I did not imagine that managers would devise and, one summer, enact a strategy to remove £900,000 worth of their colleagues with one month’s notice. And I didn’t know, until I bumped into an ex-colleague a few weeks later, that we had collectively been named “The Disappeared.”

And, at that moment, nobody knew that a global pandemic was just around the corner . . . .

Seven Days in Lockdown

Monday

Wake at 1.30 a.m. in dread. Worry over the future, regret over the past. Unable to get back to sleep. Two panic attacks.

Run mid-morning, light spots of rain. I have to move to get away from the anxiety, this feeling of dread. Run and walk for an hour or so. Take my shirt off halfway—the cool

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raindrops feel good on my skin. My body, today at least, feels alright.

Talk on the phone with Kitrina. Message Sian, Davey, Lorena, and Jon. They all reply, which helps a bit.

Walk up to see Eric and Helena soon after midday. Talk over their low garden fence. Come out about my mental health problems.

“Me too,” Eric responds. “Anxiety. Terrible. Hospital three times a week, for years wasn’t it, love?” he says, turning to Helena. “Medication. Ambulances in the night. Without my dogs, I wouldn’t be here.”

So many overlaps in our stories. It is so good to share with them. I draw comfort from it. So many people with troubles under the surface, distress you wouldn’t know from outside.

Late afternoon, I kneel for an online meditation. The teacher asks us to notice our emotions: “What are you feeling right now?” It is sadness—big sadness, sloshing around in me. Enough to make me start to cry, gently. He asks us to notice our heart: “What shape is it?” I begin to weep more deeply. I feel the tears run over my cheeks. My heart is closed in, bent over itself. It doesn’t feel open or expansive today. It feels small and tight. In defense mode.

He asks us to lie down for the final section. “Soul. This is the part of ourselves that stretches across time, that exists forever, that is constant,” he says. As I lie, eyes closed, I feel sunlight cross my face. It’s been cloudy all day, but now, the sun comes out and is angling in through the window. I feel it bathe my body in warmth. So bright through my eyelids. It moves from yellow, through bright white, into deep vivid red. All encompassing. Feels like it is everywhere, bigger than the world. It engulfs me. I wonder as I lie there if it is god taking form—my god, a god for me, a different kind of god than they taught us about. It feels like a validation, a confirmation, a reassurance; that this is OK, that I am alright, that I’m on the right path, doing the right thing.

**Tuesday**

Gray morning, light easterly breeze. Calm inside and out after eight hours sleep. Mercy. Rabbits outside, nibbling the grass. They make me smile. Will go and check the surf. Maybe do some yoga if it’s not happening.

But it is happening. Head to the beach with my 7′3″. Walk through light mist into the waves. Out the back it’s just me and three seals, popping their heads up now and again, curious—but cautious—about this new arrival who is so ungrainy in the water.

As the tide drops, I catch some fast exhilarating rides. High up the face, looking down into the chasm, sweeping turns, getting lost in the arcs. I’m following my body which is following my board which is following each line of swell as it follows the contours of the sandy ocean floor. I notice I’m holding my breath as I ride. Each second is too precious, too primal, too quickly vanished to risk a breath.

I paddle for another wave, squinting against the cool salt spray that feathers off the crest. It catches me easily and, in a second, I rise and commit left. Blinking the water out of my eyes, I look up at the wall of pale blue unfolding in front of me . . . and there is one of the seals! Body surfing. In the wave, just breaking the surface, a few feet ahead. I startle, realizing I’m going to hit her. A shout bursts out of me, over the noise of the breaking wave, in surprise and alarm. She hears it and, quick as lightening, jumps, twists, and dives. She is safe. I am relieved. And amazed.

Later, while I am on the phone to Kitrina, a fox trots through the dunes. Nonchalant. Cool as can be. I watch him walking slowly through the grasses, pausing to look over this group of small wooden houses. He takes his time. No humans to disturb him. Calm, alert, and attentive. Yet so alive. Seems to have no care in the world. He looks big, more dog than cat, all deep dusky red. But he looks wild, nothing like a pet dog. Feel good watching him for those few seconds.

**Wednesday**

The exhaustion hits again today. So tired I can’t get out of bed. It is utter. Complete.

Kitrina arrives, bringing easy to cook food. I couldn’t even get myself to the shop. I’m crying. She’s hugging. “We have a life to live, a future, good things ahead.” Is it enough to just survive, keep going, one day at a time? On days like this, it’s the most I can do. It’s the best that I can do. *I am doing my best.*

She encourages me out for a walk. Earbuds and iPhone; 4000 songs in my pocket. Walking toward the coast path, I listen to a Joan Shelley album. Perfect music for these times: gentle, deep, full of soul, of the earth. After the second play, I move on to Beth Orton’s *Central Reservation*. Exquisite, been with me for 20 years. Remember seeing her play in Atlanta, 1999, with Sam, my brother across the water. Remember the two young guys in the audience, arms round each other, standing in front of us. *Stolen Car*, featuring Ben Harper’s unrhyming playing, breathes air into my lungs. Walk along the cliff top, a cool gentle breeze, music that I love. Emotions loosen and start to flow. Something is unclogged.

When I return, I have some energy. And I see that my deathly exhaustion is tied to hopelessness. It’s not a medical condition. It’s a physical consequence of losing hope.

Look through the newly published *Handbook of Auto/biography*, in which Kitrina and I have a chapter. Notice Paul Grant’s biography: “A recovering academic who teaches yoga and tai chi.”
Thursday

Bright sunny morning. But the terror is there when I wake. Bubbling. Uprising. Threatening to overwhelm. Operationalize raft of strategies: (a) diaphragmatic breathing, (b) meditate, (c) make tea, (d) read poetry, (e) watch weather forecast, (f) write diary, and (g) do something.

Elect to do yoga. Unroll my mat and begin a gentle online class. Together, over the Internet, we sit. We notice our breath. We feel the earth supporting and holding us. Each time we notice ourselves thinking about something else, we gently guide our attention back to our breath. Gently—this in itself is a revelation to me. And, each time we return, we find that our breath is still there. It is constant. It is reliable. It is safe.

As we move, the teacher talks about living in lockdown, the need we each have at this time to counteract the stress response—both within us and out there in the world, the panic in pandemic. He asks us whether, through our practice, we might be able to send calm and love out into the world at a time of widespread distress. I wonder. But what do I know? I know I feel connected. Calm. Safe. I feel traces of hope.

Slow run to the lighthouse. Kestrel suspended low over the cliffs. I stop directly underneath him. I can see his feet, the black bar across his tan tail and his head scanning the terrain below. We are both motionless, frozen together in time for a few seconds, no sign of any other living thing. Which, I suppose, is why he eventually flies on.

Walk to the beach late afternoon. Meander in the shallows, shirt off. The tide is coming in, the water warmed by acres of hot sand. Turn back where the incoming tide hits the cliffs. Two young people head down from the dunes. She is shrieking “Alfie! Alfie!” to a dog that has run ahead of them onto the beach. One of those funny squashed face beasts: tan, medium size, inquisitive thing. Her boyfriend is wearing bright blue boardshorts. He peels his t-shirt off. He is a surfer! At home and relaxed in the sea. Supports me. If I could, I’d let it wash everything away. I lie back. Float. The Atlantic Ocean envelops me. Holds me. 12.5 degrees Celsius. Bracing. Swim to Peter’s Point and back in clear calm water. When I get out, my mind feels clear and calm too.

Launderette finally opens after weeks of COVID closure. Take two loads down. Ask the colorfully dressed woman at the counter how it is being open again. “I’m relieved to be back, hated that time, really did. But I still feel so anxious.”

Call in to the furniture shop to exchange a broken lamp. “Good to see you open again,” I say to the gentle guy who happily swaps the lamp. “It’s good to be open again. I hope this is finally over now,” he replies. It seems everyone everywhere has been suffering with this.

Later, do a short online yoga class. Dynamic and intense. Feel good for it. Probably helped by the gorgeous, topless guy—torso glistening with sweat—who is positioned on the front row. He gets lots of camera time. I am pleased about this. I do the class topless too and also get a bit sweaty. Feel a little bit human, a little bit animal, like maybe—just maybe—I still have some life to live.

Friday

Good sleep. Wake around 4 a.m. Have learned I must guard my thoughts, especially at this time of the day. Listen to Bruce Springsteen interview. He is candid about his mental health difficulties. Strategies that helped him: name it, recognize it will pass, the right medication. Asked which of his achievements he is most proud, he replies: “One, making my marriage and family; two, tackling my mental health problems; three, my music.” In that order.

Walk to the ocean for an early swim. Water back down to 12.5 degrees Celsius. Bracing. Swim to Peter’s Point and back in clear calm water. When I get out, my mind feels clear and calm too.

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Saturday

Wake early, feeling anxious, getting more so. Head out toward the coast path. Lots of dog walkers, feels too much. Angst. Building. Irrational. One couple walks parallel to me, 50 meters away. He talks too loudly about the dramas of the pandemic, his dog yaps. I speed up to get away from them. Another dog runs toward me, barking. I freeze. Immediately, the owner apologizes: “I’m so sorry. Don’t worry, he’s OK, really.” Then she calls so sweetly and softly to her dog: “Come on my darling, this way!” So kind and gentle—to me and to the dog—that I can’t help smiling.

As I walk down the wooden pathway through the dunes, I start to calm. No people here. No dogs. I stop on the headland and look out over the high waves and the surfers on them. Walk on toward the lighthouse. Stop by a bench, looking west. I go through yoga moves. Mindful movement. Standing sun salutations. Every now and then I find myself shouting out—barking almost. I check there’s no one around. More shouting as I move. Controlled but not conscious. Necessary, feels like. As I move, my anxiety...
lessens. I feel some energy. It’s like I’ve released a block, a block to life.

Climb down to the beach. Shoes off. Barefoot into cold water. I walk the long wide sand. A jangling dog bounds up, smiling, laughing, all over me. Paws on my shorts, my chest, nuzzling, gamboling. He gently tries to take my hand in his mouth. It’s a bit much so I turn away, but I’m laughing.

**Sunday**

Kitrina and I walk to visit the seals at 8 a.m. They aren’t home. But lovely walking together in the vast open space, nobody around. Stop for coffee from the Horse Box on the way back.

Friends call round later. Talk with Kandis as we walk barefoot on the sand, tell her something of my distress.

“Do you think you can control the waves?” she asks.

“No,” I say, “they’re too powerful.”

“Well how can you control what has happened to you? You’ve had some huge things to deal with. Just surviving them is enough.”

Do an online meditation, lying down. Surrender. The teacher’s voice is tender, gentle, caring, soft. He encourages and helps us to cultivate compassion and care toward another. Then toward ourselves. I go deeply into it. I feel myself ease.

Jon calls. We talk for an hour and a half. I’ve missed seeing him and playing music together. He tells me how hard he’s been hit by recent reactions in the United Kingdom against Black Lives Matter. Fascism rekindled. Memories of previous traumas reignited.

I tell him of my week, of the seals, kestrel, dogs, fox, and rabbits I’ve encountered. In Chinese culture, he tells me, visits from animals are considered significant, especially in times of need. A Chinese interpretation of my encounters is: You are going to be OK. It’s going to be alright. I draw comfort from this.

**Epilogue**

So, when it comes to mental health recovery, what actually works? Decades of research has attempted to answer this question. But it seems preposterous to me now: to try to state what works . . . for a whole population. I can’t even determine with confidence what works for me. And, besides, what constitutes “working”? Survival? Well, I’m still here. Improvement? That’s hard to determine, it shifts daily, even hourly. And sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better. Elimination of physical and psychological symptoms?

I hope these scenes from my diary shed light on what has been helpful for me, and what it has been helpful for me, with. Here, moments of doing and connecting in personally meaningful ways outweigh periods of distress and exhaustion. These moments have important meaning and value in real time, as they unfold. But I also write these moments. And re-read what I write. Revisiting them helps me feel better about myself, my life, about the difficulties mental ill-health presents. I feel optimism and hope. I nurture a precious belief that it is worth continuing. I transform myself. For the better.

Moments of distress and exhaustion can be impossible to express. Mostly, I find myself unable to write them. Distress and exhaustion can do that: silence us. Globally, we might multiply by a million times the distress I voice—so many others suffering in silence, behind closed doors, too unwilling to leave their homes. Let nobody forget that stuff happens that cannot be put into words. And writing distress is risky. The experiences themselves are demoralizing. Revisiting them demoralizes further. And total demoralization is fatal.

So, in a sense, by making this performative piece perhaps I am choosing a better story for myself. And for others too. The worst moments are absent. An act of mercy—for the reader and for myself. I reject those stories that make me feel worse—stories of symptoms, diagnoses, medication, bleak prognosis. I choose instead to tell stories of doing and connecting, of life and living. Moments when I act in and on the world. Is my story no more than a photo album of holiday snaps which bears little connection to the grim realities of living with mental distress? Or is it a selective retelling of the bits that matter most? The bits that make the suffering worthwhile. That make life survivable. A story that chooses to hope.

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