



COVID whiplash (Again?)

Nina Khouri © 25th September 2022

So, the government has now lifted basically all remaining COVID restrictions. We don't have a traffic light system anymore, we have very few mask requirements, government vaccine mandates are ending and you don't even have to isolate if a household member tests positive, so long as you monitor yourself for symptoms and do RATs.

Does anyone else feel like this is just another massive change we have to get our heads around? Another round in the whiplash of the last 2.5 years?

For the last couple of years there's been a constantly changing regime that intrudes into our daily lives.

To be clear, I think it's been justified and appropriate and I'm grateful for a government that has protected us this way. But it hasn't been easy, right?

First we had the alert level system, then the full lockdown in early 2020, then – particularly as Aucklanders – bouncing in and out of more lockdowns, which affected everyone differently: leaving aside actually catching COVID, there was everything from learning how to work from home, teach your kids from home (home schooling), loneliness and isolation for those living alone (and also for those not living alone, but perhaps in a different way), extreme economic disruption for businesses, and the general pervading fear and anxiety about what was going to happen.

And that's not even touching on the fact the borders were closed and the whole MIQ system, and what that meant for people who had structured their lives across those global boundaries.

Let alone the health reality: What if I catch it? What if someone I love catches it? Will it be mild or severe for me? What if I die? Will we see the same healthcare crisis that other countries have had? What about long COVID?

So what, with this last lifting of restrictions, is that all over now?

Our discussion topic today will involve reflecting on these changes.

In my own life the COVID rule changes have felt **relentless**. As a mediator, I help people meet for – usually – a day or two, around a table, and see if they can negotiate a solution to their dispute. This involves being in a room with a group of people you don't know that well for 10+ hours. So there are health and safety implications with COVID. Over the past couple of years this has involved: mediating totally via Zoom; mediating with some people physically in the room and some on Zoom; mediating with everyone physically in the room but everyone showing their vaccine passes; checking with venues about QR codes and making sure everyone scans in; having individual bottles of water on the table instead of carafes because the safety concern outweighs the environmental concern; having individually wrapped morning and afternoon tea rather than a platter of food; wearing masks; not wearing masks; mediating disputes within a dispute about whether one party is entitled to insist that everyone else wears masks; navigating the offence that is caused when one party refuses to wear a mask (do they really have a mask exemption?); doing RATs the day before so we have time to make alternative arrangements if someone returns a surprise positive result; doing RATs on the morning of, because everyone knows RATs are only so reliable; and generally **a lot** of discussion and planning in advance of the mediation to make sure everyone can arrive on the day feeling safe enough to be able to think clearly about the big decisions that will be required of them.

And then we have the impact of COVID on the disputes themselves. COVID feels like a person at the table in most of my mediations at the moment. From financial consequences of material delays and labour shortages on construction projects, to the implications of the COVID economy on how you calculate “business as usual” earnouts for vendors in

investment disputes, to the impact COVID has had on property prices and what that means when you're trying to divide trust assets and inheritances fairly between siblings. And also at a deeper level: I reckon everyone has been so adrenalin and cortisol fuelled for the past 2.5 years that this has affected the quality of basic working communication, which can escalate disputes – sometimes even cause them in the first place. And that basic human fear that we've all been living with for years now trickles up through layers of organisations with macro consequences.

And don't get me started on what schooling the kids has been like and how hard it's been for kids – and the teachers – to wear masks at school and cope with the shifting between in-classroom and distance home learning.

So what, with this last lifting of restrictions, is that all over now?

Well it's clearly not, right? We still have COVID in the community, and it's just another new, awful challenge for those living with immunocompromised family members, especially children.

But there is a sense of emerging, blinking into some new light spaciousness. And it coincides, for me, with spring. I can smell freesias in the air for goodness' sake. The sun is shining and you can almost hear the garden groaning with things growing.

It's kinda nice.

I went to a book launch last week for the author Emily Writes. She's a Wellington-based author, mother of two, activist and blogger who has just released her third book. It's called "Needs Adult Supervision" and I can highly recommend it.

I'm going to read you a short piece from the book called "The Future". This piece was written in 2021. (Emily has kindly given me permission to read this to you all.)

I'm reading this because – for me - it captures how it felt to be in lockdown in the darkest parts of 2021. Part of the COVID whiplash for me is forgetting what it has been like at different times – and what we longed for then.

And I'm wondering if we might, just maybe, be in a place now where some of that might be possible.

(Reads "*The Future*" from "*Needs Adult Supervision, Lessons in Growing Up*" by Emily Writes, Penguin Random House 2022)

There is still so much uncertainty for the future. Are there going to be new variants? More lockdowns? Will we look back on late 2022 and scoff – ha! We were just getting started with this pandemic.

We don't know. But I wonder if we might – for today, for these gorgeous days of spring – say, with defiantly, optimistic, joy: Enter, rejoice and come in!

<https://youtu.be/WIeHgNgG9m0>

Meditation / Conversation starter:

- 1.How are you feeling about the lifting of Covid restrictions?
- 2.Does answering that involve reflecting on the last couple of years?
- 3.Can you find a touch of joyful defiance in your plans for the rest of today?