

# THE COVID STRUGGLES LIST



Many of us continue to experience different challenges in our health and care work. This is a list of common experiences and dilemmas described by staff in a mental health and disability setting in the wake of the pandemic. Although it is not exhaustive, the aim of this list is to illustrate how many of these struggles are normal, and shared between us – we are all human and doing the best we can. It is informed by the theory and practice of Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT).

**If I put myself first I feel guilty.** I might know I need to put myself first e.g. by having downtime, or saying no, but it's still a crisis and if I do that I will feel guilty (or the organisation might make me feel like that).

**The “overwhelmed” dilemma.** The volume of information and demands changes so quickly, and different sources conflict. It is too much. I either cut off from the flow of information (but something important might get missed) or immerse myself in it (and get exhausted again – perhaps I have trouble switching off)

**The long slog.** I've done my best but I feel I can't keep this up. The longer it goes on I just feel I'm soldiering on, exhausted. I might start to doubt I can do it anymore – or leave and do something else.

**The expanding workload.** I said “yes” to extra duties initially, as I wanted to do my bit in a crisis. But there is always another extra thing being asked. I might struggle to say “no”, but saying “yes” is unsustainable.

**The lost connection.** In this new working life I only really have contact with colleagues for a particular purpose. I miss the human connection – where we really get to know each other and get to feel safe and valued – when all our contact is focussed on tasks.

**Work or home?** I can feel split between what's needed at home, and what's needed at work. I might feel confused or overwhelmed, or feel guilty about having to put one set of needs above the other; or feel guilty about not meeting either set of needs. Home and work can leak into one another in ways that feel stressful.

**The kindness gap.** With so much stress and lost connection around, it's as if people start treating each other differently. I might feel I've been treated unfairly or unkindly by others. Being stressed, I might unwittingly pass it on by being irritable with others myself. There is a gap where our kindness to each other used to be.

**The hairline cracks.** At work, if relationships have been difficult before the crisis, the extra pressure that everyone is under may make it even harder now. Communication between us might be difficult, or we get locked in argument on bones of contention.

**When our needs are different.** In my team, some staff have needed different working arrangements at times – due to shielding, isolating, long Covid, or other things. If I've remained, I might feel tired out from picking up the slack, and even feel resentful of colleagues who've been away. If I've been away, I might feel guilty, isolated, or anxious about what my colleagues might think of me, or resentful of having to stay away. How can we pull together again?

**The “boundaries” dilemma.** The world has changed so maybe we need to be flexible. But it can seem like either I stick rigidly to what I would normally do (but someone's needs don't get met) or I change the boundaries but then it doesn't feel OK.

**The “rules” dilemma.** Some of us feel we should follow the rules for everyone's good, and some feel constrained and resentful and will do their own thing. This makes us both irritable and resentful of the others, can lead to tensions in relationships, and makes it harder to find common ground. (This may apply to general public health guidance, but also to protocols of all kinds in our workplaces) In and out of the NHS. The rules are different out of work. This feels unfair, breeding resentment even if I can see there are reasons for being extra careful at work.

**Who is steering the ship?** I can feel anxious or irritated that people in charge seem uncertain, or that they change their mind. It's harder to do my job if I feel I can't trust that someone's steering the ship. But I might lose sight of how difficult it may be for those in charge, when they may be doing their best in a changing landscape, or with insufficient direction from above themselves. It might not just be us but our managers too who would like certainty when it's impossible to get it.

Continued...

**Are YOU a hero?** I may have been invited to be a hero: by the world around us, by my organisation, by myself. That can feel good, exciting, special. But this brings problems:

- No one can be a hero all the time. What happens then? It may feel like we are never allowed to make mistakes, to not know the answers, or not to be firing on all cylinders.
- If I can't be a hero (for instance if I need to stay out of things for my own health) I may feel guilty
- The spotlight may fall elsewhere, the recognition going to others whose work is more visible or dramatic. I may feel overlooked or resentful and this makes it harder to keep going.

**“All in it together?”** To start with it felt like everyone was pulling the same direction. That enabled me to dig deep and do what was needed. But now the public seem irritated or blasé, and we're not heroes any more. That makes it harder to dig deep and find some fuel left in the tank.

**The backlash.** Having been heroes, the public may be angry with us for inevitable delays or inconveniences that are still needed to provide care (e.g. phone or video appointments, mask wearing, waiting lists). That further saps my energy when it's already low.

**Absorbing the stresses of others.** People I am trying to help (staff or patients) might be very stressed and struggling to cope. I do my best to help manage their anxiety but then I am left with the anxiety myself, which can take its toll.

**The “rush or reflect” dilemma.** When there is so much to do, I may rush into things without thinking it through. However, if I stop and reflect, I fear it may then be too late.

**“In the line of fire”.** My job means I might be exposed to more risk than others. I try to rise to the challenge but it might mean I'm putting me, my family, or other patients at risk, which worries me.

**Unwelcome and welcome change.** Work has changed and there is good and bad in that. Video call fatigue and the distance from colleagues can be tough; but the flexibility and new opportunities for connecting over great distances can be good. How do I cope with the bad while taking advantage of the good?

**Touching a nerve.** Something happening at work might really touch a nerve. It might be how someone treats me, or a loss, or just a familiar situation I find myself in. That might bring difficult feelings to the surface about something tricky that happened in my past. We're all just people with our own life experiences but sometimes I can find it hard to seek support when that nerve gets touched.

## What can help

What helps to manage these struggles will differ for each of us as people, and differ across our work settings. This is a developing list of general strategies which people we have spoken to have found helpful at times. In Cognitive Analytic Therapy these are known as “exits”.

- Voicing the struggles, without shame
- Normalising - recognise the struggles are universal and normal: we are all human and all in it together, and we can support each other.
- Give yourself permission to ask for support – as a sign of strength, not shame. Get familiar with what is on offer (e.g. via the regional Staff Wellbeing Hubs). Don't be tempted to wait until you feel at breaking point.
- Organise yourselves for connection:
  - For remote workers – extra check ins, virtual coffee time, WhatsApp groups – but discuss what people find useful and what is too much
  - For present workers – creative ways to do things together e.g. socially distanced lunches; explicitly ask how each other is doing
- Consider “buddying” in pairs to regularly check in with another person who feels safe
- Create space for yourself and each other, and give permission to use it (e.g. use physical and virtual “wobble rooms”)
- Keep some “anchors” to your familiar working life (e.g. start and finish work times, team rituals such as regular team meeting times; use “setting events” for working at home e.g. use a specific chair/desk, or put on your work shoes!)
- Reconnect with things that have meaning and set simple goals
- Attend to the basics: sleep, food, physical safety
- Pay attention to boundaries and what feels comfortable; give yourself permission to separate work & home
- Shift your focus – remember the world is bigger than Covid

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