

MENTAL HEALTH VS COVID-19

As the Coronavirus pandemic grows, universities across the country close for the foreseeable future and the media continues to scaremonger, it is vital that you are looking after your mental health in this period of uncertainty and isolation. Granted, it will NOT be forever, but there are things you can do in this period of encouraged 'self-isolation' to prevent your thoughts spiralling and anxiety escalating in these troubling times. At the writing of this article the UK has not yet been put into a lockdown of any kind so it is important to remember that it is a worst case scenario and I guarantee you have been in a worst case scenario before and come out the other side thriving. There is nothing, and I mean nothing, to suggest that you cannot do the same again.

Of course, the closure of universities and ending of face to face teaching across the country is a worrying event in our academic lives, an unprecedented period of not knowing that is bound to cause some feelings of anxiety and dismay. It doesn't have to be though. The most important thing to keep in mind is the fact that you are not alone in this. This seems quite paradoxical doesn't it, a real-life juxtaposition (for any of you English students out there) that you are together in your isolation, in a stronger position than if a small minority were experiencing disruptions to their education. You are in the same position as thousands upon thousands of students nationally who have had their academic year cut short, left in the dark about upcoming assessments, packed up a year of their lives to return home, said goodbye to friends new and old, unsure when they will see them again.

This means that whatever happens to you will mean the same for everyone else. We are all entering a period of transition and change, but sometimes we have to trust the process. We have to trust that our lecturers and educational institutions have our best interests at heart and are doing all they can to ensure we are getting the most out of online learning. Let that be a comfort to your growing anxiety. Let some of the burden drop. This needs to be a team effort and everyone is playing their part.

This is a period that also brings financial worry if you are a student with a part time job that you depend upon alongside your student loan to afford rent, food and other essentials. As we are told time and time again, money doesn't grow on trees, so you are bound to fear the lack of security in current times. Let's remember again, you are not alone in this.

Essentially, times are tough. We have to pull together and keep reminding ourselves that it is only temporary (if we follow government guidelines at <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>, of course.) Declining mental health amongst students is a growing concern for mental health charities and campaigns throughout the UK, and a time like this is no different. The Mind charity website is one of the best I have found for tips on how to cope

(<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>.)

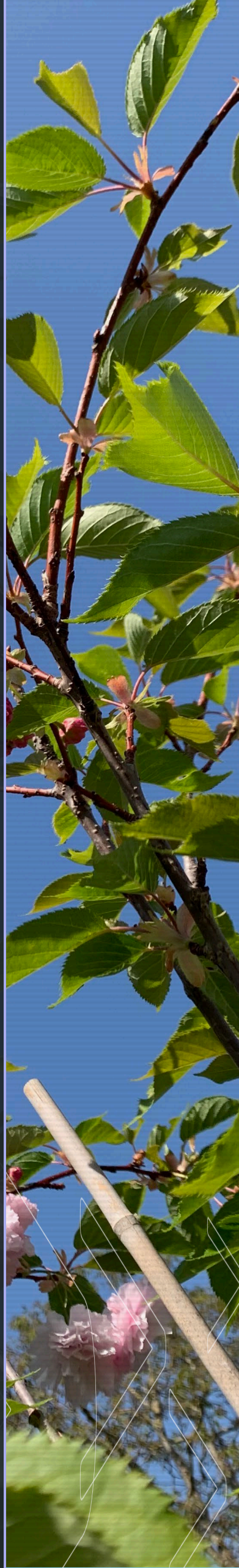


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If you are a student who has struggled at any point during your university experience with your mental health then I really salute your bravery at this time. Whether you have an eating disorder, depression, generalised or health anxiety, BPD, or any other mental health disorder this pandemic is not something to be taken lightly in your healing and recovery. But if you feel like you were making progress or even entering a period of recovery before this covid-19 chaos then please don't be disheartened if you feel you are starting to struggle. When considering how I would approach this piece my thoughts turned to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* and her young female narrator forcefully confined to the upstairs nursery following a pre-natal depressive episode. Her well-meaning but toxic husband has ordered her incarceration as we see our government and medical professionals ordering widespread social distancing and isolation for anyone showing symptoms of the coronavirus. These are well meaning but potentially toxic forces at play for our mental health, providing us with endless facts and figures that will not change the situation only escalate our fear.

The story follows her slowly descending into madness as she begins to see the bizarre pattern on the 'sickly' yellow wallpaper (p.8) 'budding and sprouting in endless convolutions' (p.109) until she actually believes there is a woman in the wallpaper that she must free from her entrapment. Now obviously, there are so many ways we could read this in terms of patriarchal oppression and women's role in the home during the 19th century but we can also take something from it to help us with current events.

The narrator talks of her mental health as something she believed she had under control but this period of isolation feels like a step backwards in the wrong direction. She says "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you." Mental health issues can be isolating, debilitating and traumatic at the best of times but this new period of isolation does not have to manifest these feelings. Isolation can open doors for new hobbies, new information, new ways of seeing the world.



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Cancelling gigs, flights, shifts, theatre shows, conferences, basically any form of mass gathering is obviously frustrating in terms of losing money and time spent with loved ones, but it doesn't mean we have to lose faith that things will get better. Channel this energy, this faith, into other things.

Gilman has said herself that this story wasn't intended to drive people crazy it was intended to save them; we can use this country-wide isolation- forced or otherwise- to refocus and find clarity. We can finish a piece of work we've been procrastinating over for weeks, we can read a book that is gathering dust on a shelf, write a poem reflecting on recent affairs, set up a go fund me for people who may not be able to afford to bulk buy beans and toilet roll, maybe even get ahead on seminar work, god forbid! Remember too, that sometimes doing nothing is absolutely okay. Equally, if you want to write a novel or run a marathon then please be my guest! There are no rules in this. We have to support ourselves and those closest to us in the ways we see best.

This pandemic does not have to be earth shattering to your mental health and the progress you have already made or hoped to make. It puts a pause on normal life, but this is a new normal for the time being. Let us use this time to do good, be good and good will come. Self-isolation is a necessary means to a hopefully imminent end. Take control of your own narrative and you will reap the benefits. Tell your mental health who is going to come out the other side of this stronger, and I assure you it won't be your illness.

(Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*
(California: Xist Publishing, 2015)

