

THE CONVERSATION

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Fitter, better rested, more appreciative: research reveals the positive changes experienced by some during lockdown

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Author



Lynn Williams
Reader in Psychology, University of Strathclyde

National lockdowns have been the most profound and significant public health interventions within living memory. They have been difficult socially and economically, and have negatively affected people's health in many different ways.

But for some people lockdowns have provided an unexpected opportunity to make positive changes to their lives, running counter to prevailing narratives of disrupted daily lives, health inequalities and damaged mental health.

In May 2020, my colleagues and I surveyed over 3,000 people in Scotland to find out what positive changes people had made in their lives during the lockdown period. We also wanted to find out *who* had made these positive changes, to see if there were particular groups that were more able to do this than others.

In the survey, we assessed the positive changes that people had experienced across a number of different aspects of their lives since the start of lockdown. There were questions about whether people had experienced positive changes in relationships with family and friends and in the wider community. We also asked about beneficial changes in people's behaviour relating to their health, including physical activity and sleep.

More than half the people we surveyed reported these changes for the better: being more appreciative of things usually taken for granted (reported by 83% of participants), having more time to do enjoyable things (by 67%), spending more time in nature or outdoors (by 65%), paying more attention to personal health (by 62%), doing more physical activity (by 54%) and spending more time with a partner or spouse (by 53%).



Despite gyms being closed and limitations on exercising outside, many used lockdown to improve their fitness. BAZA Production/Shutterstock

An [Australian study](#) (still in preprint, meaning its findings are yet to be reviewed by other scientists) also sought to find out similar information. In a survey of over 1,000 people, it found that 70% of participants reported having experienced at least one positive effect of the pandemic. Three main positive effects noted in this survey were: having the opportunity to spend more time with family, having greater flexibility in working arrangements and appreciating having a less busy life.

The important role of time was highlighted across both studies. Lockdown has removed many of life's routines and demands – and for some people this has afforded them more time to spend on activities they enjoyed and valued. Noticing that how we spend time has changed – and thinking about what we can do with any additional time that we have – may be an important first step in making positive changes to our lives during lockdown.

People also noted being more appreciative of things previously taken for granted and the slower pace of life that lockdown has brought. For many people, this may have enabled them to step back and reflect on their lives, their futures and what is important to them in a way that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to do, without the demands of daily commutes or social commitments.

Positive changes not universal

Turning to *who* experienced the positive changes, [our study](#) revealed that the groups with higher levels of positive change were women, younger people, people who were married or living with their partner, those who were employed and those reporting better health. These findings suggest that while some groups were able to take advantage of lockdown as an unexpected opportunity to make positive changes in their lives, others – such as older adults and those living on their own – were not.



Removing the commute by working from home has allowed many people to get up later. oatawa/Shutterstock

We were also interested in finding out what would happen to the positive changes that people had made once restrictions started lifting. Would they be able to keep them up? In a [separate paper](#), based on the same group of participants, we examined the changes that people had made to their physical activity, sitting and sleep during the first national lockdown period and whether they had maintained these two months later, once restrictions had been eased.

The good news was that half of the participants who reported positive changes in their behaviours during lockdown were able to keep these going once restrictions were eased. Some were even able to improve them further. So, while we are currently experiencing another period of national lockdown in the UK, it's reassuring to know that some positives could emerge.

However, we should keep in mind that winter, the new strains of the virus circulating and being over a year into the pandemic will all give this lockdown a different feel to last spring's, and that this might have an influence on what positive changes people are able to make and sustain. But as we think ahead to the post-pandemic recovery phase, the lesson from our research is that there are definitely some changes people will want to keep.

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