

Relationships and resilience in the time of the Coronavirus

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Abstract

The Why Not? Trust for Care Experienced Young People is a charity set up in 2018, to support long term connections and relationships between young people with care experience and the people who matter to them. As well as individual connections, the Why Not? Trust is supporting young people, including young parents with care experience to develop their own community networks. These networks allow young people to access experiences and events which give opportunities they may not be able to access on their own. ENDED HERE. Their approach is based on a belief in being defined by relationships. The COVID-19 lockdown presented a challenge to relational engagements which are contingent upon being able to interact. Despite their fears they have managed to cope. The online world provided a way of maintaining contact and providing support with young care experienced adults. The experiences of the past few months helped the Trust better understand the causes of isolation and exclusion, but also to appreciate more than ever the value of human relationships.

Keywords

COVID-19, relationships, resilience, The Why Not? Trust

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When coronavirus pandemic struck, we were all keen to see the back of it. Most of us were struggling with the controls needed to stop the spread of the virus to protect one another; ourselves, loved ones and strangers. We all have experience of being carers now, staying at home and keeping a distance is how we've exercised compassion. We have been deprived of the connections in our lives and agency over how we live it. The things we take for granted and the foundations for living well, for purpose and belonging. When we sought to compensate for these losses we would tune into social media and were sometimes confronted with jarring content. Judgements being made about how people should and should not behave or clichéd memes that felt falsely optimistic. What we needed was something that said we are all a little frightened and an offer something that might help. We were all anxious and grieving for the loss of something, or someone, worried for ourselves, each other and what we may yet lose.

Life as we had known it seems like a distant memory, coming together as a community was an important function for members of The Why Not? Trust. Meeting up regularly and breaking bread together always led to magic moments of connection. Our approach is based on an unerring belief that we are defined by relationships, with ourselves, with others, and it is through these that we make sense of the world and our place in it. And, that need and aspiration are universal human characteristics that emerge, are met and achieved in our relationships with one another. Enabling these is the best way to support wellbeing. With our young adults we create spaces and experiences within which these relationships can thrive, community develops and through our interactions we act to support one another. The lockdown has presented a challenge to relational engagement that is contingent upon being able to interact within a shared space. Despite our fears we have managed to cope, and in some ways grow.

Stories of hope have developed across communities and ours is no exception. The young adults involved with Why Not? have created new ways of connecting through online group chats. This is helping them not only to pass the time but to create safe space for some to express anxiety and have it soothed. If, sometimes, only through a ludicrously funny post that eases fears, at least for a

little while. Connectors were leaving groceries at the doors of their beloved young adults; this concern is being reciprocated by the young adults who are also checking in on their connectors to make sure they are okay. Conflicts from the past have been resolved, or set aside, as the gravity of the pandemic shifted perspectives and compelled us to focus on what is genuinely important; to paraphrase Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a moment of reconciliation can be worth more than a lifetime of friendship.

We have some members of our care experienced community who are key workers in care and health services. They have proudly gone out to work every day, contributing to the national effort to ensure those most vulnerable to the virus are safe and cared for – our very own heroes. We have witnessed our young parents get creative with their bairns, letting them paint on walls, with washable paint obviously. Baking skills are on point and they have developed an acrobatic flair on their trampolines.

Moving online

On discovering video conferencing, along with the rest of the world, we began to plan which would suit our community best. We organised online activities and meetings using video conferencing only to discover some members wanted to participate but did not have the devices needed; some who did join had to leave because of data limitations on their devices. As Roesch-Marsh (2020) identified through recent research with young people being able to connect with friends, partners and family virtually was essential to wellbeing. Digital exclusion wasn't something we'd considered before but quickly became an urgent issue when we struggled to make contact and maintain connections with some of our young adults living alone. We needed to address this. We secured some grant funding through [Foundation Scotland](#) and the [Corra Foundation](#) resilience funds that allowed us to contribute to phone top-ups and devices for our care experienced community members.

The more connected we are, the more connected we become; the opposite is also true, and disconnection often leads to isolation and exclusion. When we were working to distribute resources to support digital connectivity and access

ICT infrastructure, we discovered the least connected of young adults often didn't have access to basic services such as bank accounts or were so overdrawn they would never receive any funds paid to them. We were peeling back the layers of disadvantage, ever decreasing opportunities as the access to basic services necessary for the management of our day to day affairs were not open to them.

As noted by McGhee and Roesch-Marsh (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the disadvantages that many care experienced adults and young people endure. Moreover, digital exclusion compounds existing disadvantages in relation to access to, and engagement in, employment, education, and support services. Most potently for us, the circumstances of the pandemic threatened to undermine the relationships and informal support networks that have developed within our community that alleviate loneliness and isolation, increasing the threat these can have on wellbeing.

Access to digital hardware and connectivity must be considered a necessity for wellbeing, as a basic utility in the same way electricity and water are, and a fundamental right for young people moving on from care. While we found other ways of supporting our community members to digitally connect, the difficulties navigated emphasised the need to ensure, when entering the 'adult world', young people are equipped with the resources, skills and confidence required to access the societal infrastructure necessary to be included as active citizens.

We are continuing to adapt and develop the way we support, and maintain the relationships that are at the heart of the Why Not? Community, using technology. We've celebrated birthdays online and given one of our young adults a virtual send off as he moved to England to start a course at university. These are important rites of passage in the life of our diverse community, for young adults at peak vitality, that require ritual and celebration to embed memories and to edify the belief they matter and that we matter to one another. However well we do this, the virtual world is not the real world, there is no substitute for human contact and we know there are some people in our midst struggling, 'needing hugs' as one of our young adult's put it. Technology enables us to communicate to some extent and it can act as life support for relationships. But,

for these to develop and grow we need to be in proximity where presence lights up the spaces between us and we cross the border of self and into the worlds of one another, where interdependencies form and community is created.

As the circumstances brought about by the pandemic have worn on, we will continue to proceed with caution, working to ensure physical distance does not lead to social and emotional isolation. We will indeed be glad to see the back of the challenges COVID-19 has wrought, through the experiences of the last few months we have a renewed appreciation of the value of relationships. What we previously thought of as normal will be good enough and we are determined to *build back better*- progressing the principles of our [#RightToRelationships](#) Charter.

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About the authors

Danny has worked with Care Visions since April 2002, and in a residential environment with children and young people since 1994, in various roles. He is interested how relationships in residential care can be a pre-cursor for healing and growth and how we might better enable these.

Nicki is the Manager of Why Not? Connections and Community which sits within The Why Not? Trust for Care Experienced Young People. Nicki also has continued relationships (Connector) with young people she cared for during her time as a Residential Child Care Worker. At time of writing Nicki was the Manager of Why Not? Connections and Community and is now a Residential Child Care Manager with Care Visions. She continues to be an active community member with the Why Not? Trust and is engaged in continuing relationships with several young people, some of whom she cared for in her previous role as a residential child care worker.