

Mental and social health during the pandemic

Finding strength in difficult times

By psychologist Brynjar Gunnarskog, AktiMed and Aker Care

Challenging times

There is no doubt that times are challenging during the corona pandemic, both in Norway and in other countries. As you may have read in the articles I have written about cabin fever and worrying thoughts, there are a lot of things these days that can be challenging to many of us. We may feel more or less isolated and experience different concerns. There is nothing new in experiencing difficult times. People have experienced difficult times both in Norway and other countries. Many have been through difficult times on a personal level, without the whole nation being affected. Actually, it is sometimes easier to handle difficult times when we experience it as a group. Standing alone in a crisis, for instance losing someone you love, can often be extra challenging. It's not only the terrible experience of losing someone, but also the realization that not everybody take part in the grief and that the world goes on as if nothing happened. Therefore, going through difficult times as a group, as a big community, can provide a basis for unity, connection, a feeling of belonging and social warmth, which can be a strength during difficult times. We are *getting* a crisis, but we are *giving* each other strength, as it says in a phrase that Winston S. Churchill, the British Prime Minister during WW2 stated: «*We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give*».

The pandemic, and the consequences of all the measures that have been taken, can therefore be experienced as less difficult when we are in it together. However, there is no doubt that the experience will vary from person to person and that, objectively, for some, this period will be more challenging than for others. Some may have had issues before the pandemic began and these issues are now intensified. It is not always the case that everyone finds strength in the community. Then it's about finding strength somewhere else; within oneself. Often what people refer to as *inner strength*. Here we could add additional concepts, such as *personal strength*, *mental strength*, and certainly several other concepts that describe much of the same.

Maybe you`re like a dandelion?

Many people probably see the dandelion as a weed, something that is completely impossible to remove because the roots are far beneath the asphalt. It is almost fascinating, as well as annoying, to see how a dandelion can grow under very difficult conditions. A flower should grow in soft soil, not through asphalt! Some of you have probably heard of "dandelion child". This term has become a popular definition for people who are doing well in life, despite difficult conditions growing up. The term refers to a dandelion; it grows and becomes yellow and beautiful despite difficult conditions.

As there are different flowers, there are different people. Some perform better than others during difficult conditions. And that's really interesting, because it *does* mean that there may be some strengths that may exist in everyone, but some are better at finding this strength than others. In psychology, we use terms such as robustness or resilience to explain that some are more resilient than others when facing various challenges. And with that; the strengths of being resistant to external stresses and crises.

I believe most people have the strength to deal with crises, which means that YOU can be just like a dandelion. But maybe you need to *look* for these strengths. It's just like hide and seek; he who does not seek, does not find. And sometimes it can be extra difficult to find the strengths and then we actually have to spend even more time and energy looking for these. Because they are there! It's just that when we feel vulnerable and weak, it's so hard to look, to find and to know our strengths. It's a pity that this is the case, as it is precisely when we are at our most vulnerable we need the strengths.

My ship is loaded with...

We all carry a history, where different events and experiences have affected us in one way or another. Imagine that we are a ship sailing the seas. The ship has sailed for as long as you have lived. Imagine all the stops along the way where we have collected cargo that we have taken with us further on our journey. The ship itself, its engine and interior, are the starting point for the journey. We get the cargo along the way. We can imagine that the ship is how we are at conception and that the cargo is happenings and events, experiences and stories, both good and bad, that we have brought with us in life. Often these experiences will also have associated emotions, which is precisely why we take on this load, it means something to us. The storage space on the ship can thus be associated with our memory - this is where we store what we have taken with us so far.

I have often challenged people I meet in therapy to explore their own ship and cargo. For example, if they are asked to write down their life story, focusing on events that have had special significance, then most people manage to do this quite well. When they mention some of these events, they may be uncertain whether it is a significant event or not. The answer to that is often in your memories; If you remember it, the event is probably important to you. Otherwise, you probably wouldn't have stored the memory at all. You do not fill your ship with cargo that means nothing to you. Then you would become a sinking ship! Also, we have kind of a system on how to store this load. What has been particularly threatening and traumatic, we would prefer to store at the bottom of the ship, as far back as possible. In fact, so far away that we don't have to see it when we do an inspection round. In psychology, we call this load a *traumatic memory*. The problem with this type of load is that it can suddenly "pop back up" again, without warning and without us being prepared. This usually happens as a result of something "triggering" these memories, often a new event or experience similar to those memories. Many of you have probably heard of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), it is characterized by having sudden memories that emerge from various triggers, which again makes us avoiding these triggers. But it actually has its function. The triggers are there to help you avoid a danger that you have previously experienced. You can read more about this in the description of the limbic system in the article "How to handle worrying thoughts".

On your journey you have also brought experiences of mastery, coping and experiences of success, fortunately this cargo is stored on a higher level. These are memories that you use both in daily tasks, tasks at work and when you face new challenges where you have to be creative, but where you can use experience from previous learning. When you are in difficult situations, you will try to find strategies from this part of the load. You will often find what you are looking for.

However, sometimes we find that we do not have good enough strategies to deal with the challenges we face and we find the situation extremely demanding and difficult. For some, today's situation with the pandemic and its consequences, could be this type of situation. This can make us feel vulnerable and lose faith in our own ability to find a solution. We simply cannot find the right cargo in our ship. In this situation it is easy to feel hopelessness and say to yourself that "I am not good enough, I can't do anything". When we enter this circle of negative thoughts about ourselves it is very difficult to find the strengths. The strengths are

there, but we may have stopped believing that it is – we have lost sight of the cargo that is loaded with strengths.

Your strengths *may* lay at the bottom of the ship.

During very difficult times, maybe like today, and you feel that you have lost faith in yourself and your own coping strategies, it *does* require some work from yourself. Then you have to take an inspection round in your ship, and maybe more than just one round. You need to do an active search for your strengths. Sometimes you have to go all the way to the bottom of the ship, where the threatening and perhaps traumatic memories are stored. During crisis it is easy to forget the strengths you used to get through the crisis the last time it happened. You *did* actually find the strength at that time, otherwise you would not read this article right now. Maybe you have experienced a previous breakup? Those who have been through a breakup know that it is quite challenging. But you *did* find the strength to handle it. If you are in the middle of a breakup at this point, as some of you may be, then you *do* have the strength to handle that too. You just have to look long enough, then you *will* find the right cargo in the end, the cargo you need to get back to believing that "I will manage to get through this, I have done it before". During extremely difficult times, some may also forget some of the strengths that lie in the upper part of the load. You will perhaps think that you do not manage anything, even though you have actually managed in the past. Then you have to do another inspection in your ship and look for small victories, big moments, an exam you passed, a job you managed to get. All the small cargos that together make up your strength - and then your strength will grow, I promise you!

Remember, you have more than enough cargo in your ship – as long as you take the time to look, you will find strength in difficult times.