

MAKING MOLEHILLS

adapting to change



Sindhu Manivannan

She/Her

Senior

Neuroscience

How many times have you heard it said that “we are living in unprecedented times,” or “this year has just been crazy,” or, better yet, “welcome to our new normal”? As much as the rhetoric has started to sound repetitive, the unfortunate reality is that it is all true.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the entire world in ways we could never have imagined. A year ago, we would have never thought of not leaving the house without a mask, not sitting down at a restaurant for months, or not seeing the faces of friends nearly as often as we used to. Life has undeniably changed for everyone, and the likely truth that comes along with this fact is that we have changed along with it.

From changes in our speech and mannerisms to changes in our physical selves, it is difficult to say that we are the exact same human beings each year. Especially after a year like 2020, it is nearly impossible to say that we are still the exact same individuals who unknowingly entered the pandemic. While the idea of unconsciously becoming a new person may seem daunting, it’s actually not as uncommon as you might think. According to Christopher Soto for National Public Radio, personalities typically do change over time and often result in people becoming more agreeable, conscientious and emotionally resilient.

These changes are not always positive though, and it is possible that everyone may not notice a shift in their personalities. I can feel it in the way I wake up in the morning—sensing yet another day in my bones. I feel it in the way that I am more hyper aware than ever before of how close people are to me, and in the way that I miss the sunshine just a little more as I go another day of not venturing outside. The little things that we do not instantly realize accumulate until, one day, we find the mountain that they have created.

Why does it seem like these mountains are forming for more people now than ever before? The most encompassing (and possibly surprising) answer is trauma. Trauma is defined by the Center for Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders as “a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply

distressing or disturbing,” and while COVID-19 might not contain the same violent connotations that are typically associated with trauma, the sudden and drastic changes that have accompanied it fall under the definition. In fact, Ed Prideaux with BBC Future reported in February 2021 that 13.2% of the surveyed general population and 20% of healthcare professionals indicated PTSD symptoms. This is an increase from years past.

In the blink of an eye, the world was placed on lockdown, weeks turned into months between visits with family and distinctions between days disappeared. Every night, news channels reported how many more people had died and, after watching the world seemingly deteriorate every night for almost a year, is it any wonder that people have been traumatized? The world has suddenly turned into a much scarier place than it already was, and when it starts to feel like the outside world is a sea of chaos, it is not hard to see how the trauma can accumulate over the course of a year.

COVID-19 has changed us—so what do we do about it?

The short answer: nothing. Humans are, at our core, beings that are constantly changing. Our ability to constantly morph is part of what helps us adapt to our ever-changing surroundings, and while we may feel nostalgia for the old days, the changes that come with surviving a pandemic are changes that most likely cannot be reversed.

The long answer, on the other hand: everything. A lot of the changes that people are experiencing during quarantine, according to the Cleveland Clinic, include positive ones like spending more time in nature, exercising in different and more frequent ways and changing diets to incorporate healthier components. Christian Jarrett at BBC Future also reports a possible increase in the Michelangelo Effect, a phenomenon wherein our aspirations and ambitions can be more likely attained if we spend sustained time in supported environments (like quarantine with people who believe in you).

Morphing into our pandemic personalities also brings with it the idea of doing things that we have always

OUT OF MOUNTAINS

during COVID-19

wanted to do but never had the chance. While it is true that COVID-19 has brought change and despair around the world, it has also brought many of us the chance to take time to pursue our hobbies and find out what we really enjoy.

People took the time given by quarantine to finally learn how to bake bread, to grow plants and harvest the fruits of their labor, to learn a language that they once thought was unattainable. We danced, we sang, we laughed, we created, we found peace in the still moments and chaos in the loud ones, we learned to love when we did not expect to, and we learned to cry when we finally needed to. We discovered life again—and we did it while the world changed—allowing ourselves to change along with it.

So what do we do with the new life that blooms around us? We do what we have been doing: find our own ways to heal and recover. We learn from our pasts and change our futures with the tools we have at hand. We take the world that has crumbled around us, and we pick ourselves up from the pieces of rubble. We take each other's hands as much as we can and rebuild ourselves from the ground up, finding ourselves yet again while the chaos continues to rage. We find the spots of sunshine and we latch on, bringing our newly rediscovered selves along for the ride.

Without a doubt, everything has changed. The introduction of a pandemic into our lives has transformed everything we know and, with it, we have transformed too. A year later, we are different beings from who we used to be, and we are not alone in our evolution. While symptoms of trauma have increased, our sense of community has not wavered. We have each other to lean on and depend upon as we make our way through our own journeys of healing.

Consider how you have changed during the course of the pandemic. Honor your growth and accept the turbulence. Acknowledge the struggles of your friends and family, and practice patience with coworkers and colleagues. Allowing each other to adapt is an essential and increasingly challenging part of recovery.

One way or another, we will continue to adapt to

the situations that life will throw at us. We will learn to find new ways to keep loving life in the way that we were always meant to. No matter what comes next, no matter how different we may end up being, we will take all of the new parts of ourselves that we have discovered and continue forward with them. As award-winning writer Haruki Murakami says, "When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about."