

MINDING COVID STORIES - EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID

Mind were commissioned to develop a programme of engagement to draw on the expertise of people with lived experience of mental health difficulties to explore the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on mental wellbeing.

We were interested in exploring how people coped with isolation and what activities and strategies they found most beneficial. We were also interested in hearing peoples' experiences of interacting with medical and social care services and with their wider community, stories of working through the pandemic and their experiences and challenges of accessing support via digital mechanisms.

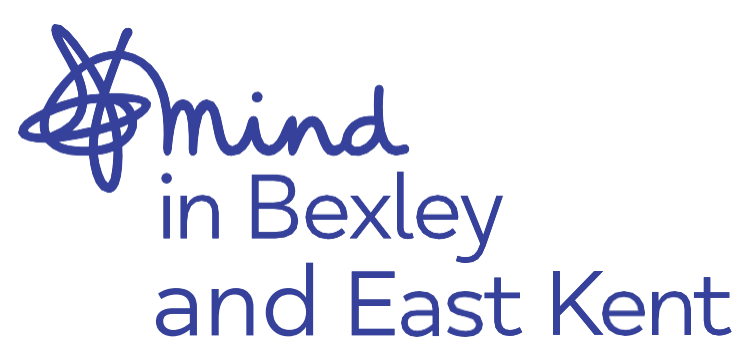
The aim of the study was to investigate the feelings and experiences of recipients using qualitative oral history research methods. Significantly this study has important educational benefits, giving the recipients the opportunity to speak out about their experiences thereby generating awareness in public attitudes towards the complex issues of mental health. Individual 'voices' narrate stories, express opinion, and so contribute to the ongoing discourse within health and social care. The equitable nature of oral history, which values individual subjective knowledge and allows them to give validity in the debate and analysis. In this study, the qualitative data provides in-depth insights and allowed themes to emerge. The research also provides valuable information for Mind in Bexley and East Kent, commissioners and service providers in designing pathways of support that increase recovery outcomes, choice and control.

The Mind research team engaged with 20 service users and participants were from a range of genders, ages and ethnicity. Engagement was time intensive due to Covid restrictions. All interviews were undertaken digitally (N=20) and followed a conversation approach where individuals were encouraged to freely discuss issues they felt were important to them. The interviewer (AM) took care to be sensitive to topics initiated by the narrators and to allow the interview to proceed in as naturalistic manner as possible. Interviews were written verbatim or audio recorded with participants' written consent and the recordings and transcripts were transcribed for a thematic analysis.

The research team considered key ethical issues and dilemmas including the complex issues of insider and outsider status, lack of familiarity with the research process, issues of informed consent and safeguarding anonymity; these issues were addressed in the invitation to participate, design of the interviews and process of data collection. Interviews varied in duration but lasted on average for 50 minutes and all interviews were undertaken at a time which was convenient to participants. Interviews were conducted between 11th March and the 1st July 2021 and reflect the evolving nature of the pandemic, associated restrictions, challenges and coping mechanisms.

Images

Participants were asked to contribute images for the exhibition of something that had been meaningful to them during this challenging time. Images chosen reflect topics discussed during the interviews.



COVID-19 AND LOCKDOWN

In March 2020 the Government introduced the first UK national lockdown to help prevent the spread of the Coronavirus and to protect the NHS from becoming overwhelmed.

People were instructed to stay at home and only allowed to leave home to:

- Shop for basic necessities as infrequently as possible
- Exercise once a day either alone or with members of their household
- Attend to any medical need or to provide care or help to a vulnerable person
- Travel to and from work, but only where this was absolutely necessary and could not be done from home

To ensure compliance with the Government's instruction to stay at home, all shops selling non-essential goods and other premises including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms, and places of worship were immediately closed. Gatherings of more than two people in public – excluding people you lived with were banned and all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals were stopped.

Unprecedented changes

The pandemic has affected people's mental health and wellbeing in many different ways, with social isolation, substance misuse and anxiety being particular issues for many. At the same time, there was an increased sense of community responsibility and strengthening of neighbourhood networks. Some people's mental health was preserved; there are anecdotal reports that in a few cases people with severe mental illness actually felt better because they felt less social pressure.

Coping with the mental health impact of the pandemic was an enormous challenge for statutory and voluntary services and the people themselves. This was as true in Bexley and East Kent as elsewhere, and the nature and full extent of that impact is still emerging.



MIND IN BEXLEY AND EAST KENT

Mind in Bexley and East Kent is a mental health charity offering an extensive range of support, advice and information to the community. Mind promotes wellbeing and works to reduce poor mental health and the stigma associated with it. Mind supports people in their recovery and champions better services for everyone.

A Mental Health Emergency

When a global pandemic was declared in March 2020 it caused a mental health emergency.

During the Covid 19 Pandemic Mind:

- Delivered support to individuals through more than 40 different community-based projects
- Delivered and invested in its digital offer and provided on average 50 online support sessions per week, as well as workshops and courses
- Set up new initiatives including a Wellbeing support line, an IT access hub for digitally excluded people, a community pantry to assist with food poverty and established a BAME community worker to improve access
- Explored innovative ways of working digitally and formed new partnerships that would help further enhance how Mind connected and engaged with residents and the communities they served
- Developed peer-led and co-produced initiatives with people who have lived experience
- Increased its support for bereavement and tailored its advice and resources to help residents with their employment challenges



IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

The Covid 19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the virus and to protect the NHS had a huge impact on how we all lived our lives. For most people normal activities were suspended. The effect on mental health and wellbeing has been significant and is likely to be long lasting.

Despite hearing inspiring and positive stories of resilience and determination, the majority of people we spoke to for this project found it made already difficult situations worse.

At the beginning of the pandemic some participants experienced a range of reactions. They talked of being frightened, distressed, depressed, overwhelmed;

‘...Covid (was) like a forced depression... I got to a really dark place just in a couple of weeks...’

‘...Right at the very beginning it was awful, it was so bad. I was in tears almost every single day. I was panicking every single day even though I wasn’t going outside.’

‘...I just got back from a holiday...and we were in lockdown and things became very difficult because I was so active before. I couldn’t find a direction. I was just sort of swamped by everything. I was very agitated...’

One expressed their frustration at the enforced monotony of daily life;

‘...It’s soul destroying and what’s the point of getting up? What you going to do? Nothing! ...’

Another participant with caring responsibilities explained they were no longer able to gain respite from their situation and needed to find new coping mechanisms;

‘...it had a significant impact because I had to start afresh I guess on how I coped with my mental health, how I dealt with what life was throwing at me, because everything I was used to I couldn’t actually do anymore...’

Distressingly, one participant with physical health problems told us;

‘...Sometimes I have just stayed in bed and prayed because I expected to die...’

Some appear to have coped well

Some people we spoke to appear to have coped well and were able to reflect on the positive impact or ‘silver linings’ of the pandemic, be it a greater connectivity through digital communication, continuing to work through the pandemic or appreciating the strength of a relationship;

‘...(it’s) not all doom and gloom, there has been a silver lining to it and I think if everybody looked hard enough they’d find their own silver lining, but you have to look...’

IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

One participant explained;

‘I’ve made a whole load of new friends and got something to do every single day – all from Mind.’

A key worker participant reflected;

‘...I suppose it hasn’t been that bad really...not personally as although I endured the lockdown, in some ways I haven’t, because I had reason for going out for working purposes...’

A married participant explained how the pandemic had made their marriage closer;

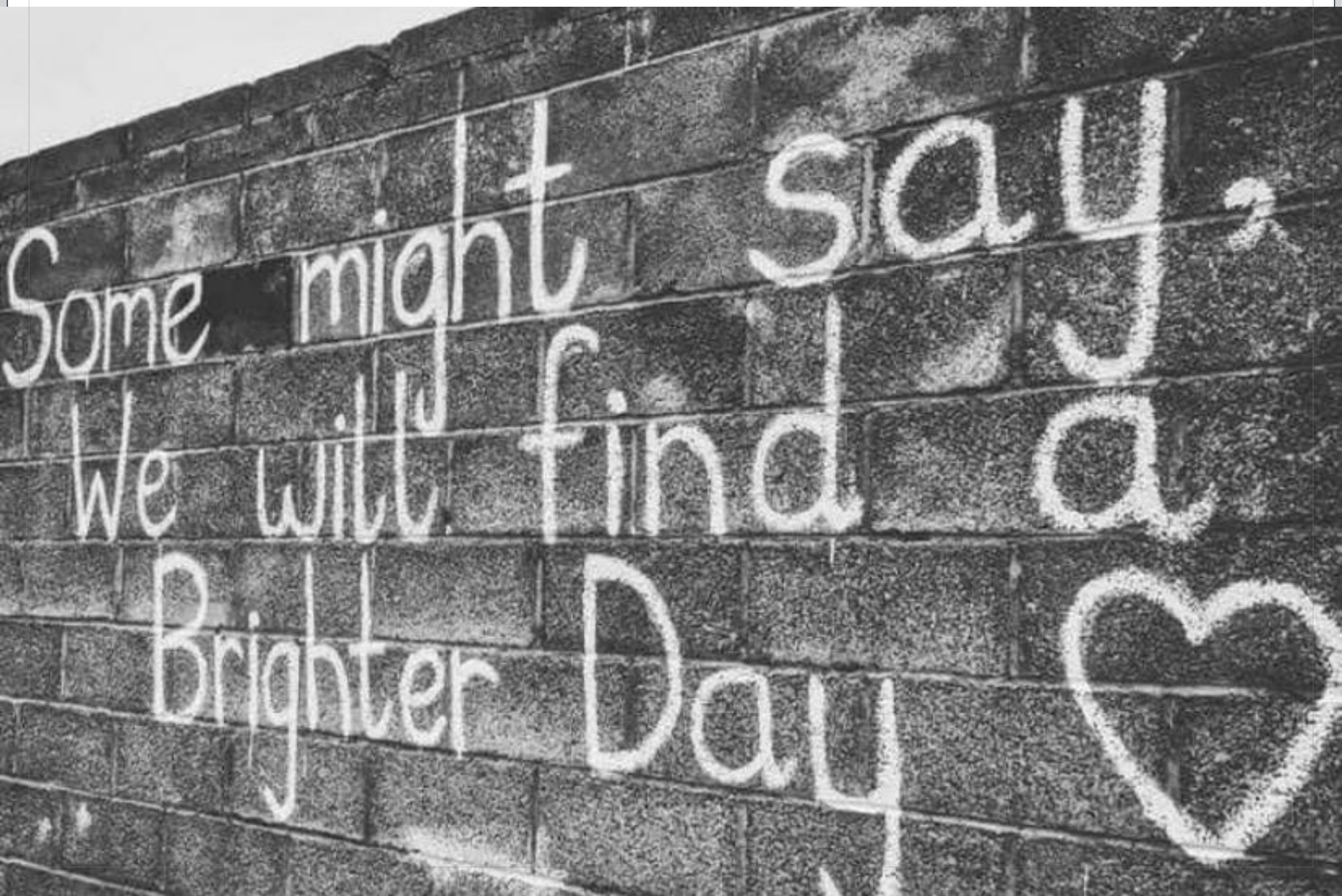
‘...We’ve got a good marriage, it made it slightly better in a way...’

Living another story

However, for a significant number of participants despite acknowledging the challenges that Covid had on their mental health, they describe how a more traumatic event, experience or incident relating to family, work, past history, health issues or living situation has been the dominant overriding issue during this period.

This participant sums this up well;

‘...the pandemic has been on the forefront of everyone’s mind and I’ve just been living a whole other story separate from that...’



ISOLATION

For many participants the experience of isolation was very difficult. Isolation has very strong links to worsening mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety and cognitive decline (Novotney, 2019). Some participants we spoke to lived in a family, whereas others lived alone and some found themselves on their own for the very first time.

Here a number of participants describe their experience of isolation during the pandemic;

‘...I’m not used to being on my own to be honest. I haven’t lived on my own in my entire life...I’ve always had an open house...in my previous house I didn’t even have a lock on the front door and people came in and out when they wanted to and to just all of a sudden be on my own...’

‘...when you live on your own there is no-one to give you a hug and to say you’ll be alright. That’s what I find the most difficult...’

‘...I would say you feel lonely, you really feel lonely and you almost feel you are the only one it is happening to but you know you’re not and the days seem so long in the winter...’

‘...I felt isolated normally and with the pandemic it was much worse because like I said I’d just found a support group with people that I was going to and could relate a little and it was all taken away. I rang the Samaritans a couple of times. I wasn’t planning on doing anything. I just wanted someone to talk to...’

‘... I went to Pets at Home in desperation because I was so lonely because I was totally on my own and I bought 2 rats because that’s all they had...’

Some were left struggling with physical health problems alone;

‘...basically, it’s been horrendous to be left on your own with limited guidance from what you can get over the phone...’

Yet some participants welcomed the isolation and felt it gave them the opportunity to retreat from challenging situations;

‘So I’m quite an isolated individual anyway so Covid in itself hasn’t impacted on me greatly and in some ways it’s done me a favour, and it feels terrible to say it because other people have suffered because of it, but I haven’t felt the pressure to go back to work...’

One participant reflected on the value of the digital platform Zoom which helped combat their feelings of isolation, experienced even prior to the pandemic;

‘...I was isolated because I wouldn’t go out and see people. Anytime that I did have to, it was such a struggle with all the anxiety but now that I can sit in my safe spot in my house and still interact with people via Zoom so they can’t hurt me....It’s broken isolation for me...’

MIND'S SUPPORT

Mind in Bexley and East Kent mobilised quickly and transitioned all services digitally to make sure everyone with a mental health problem in the local community was able to access support. Overwhelmingly, the majority of participants we spoke to for this project were positive about the help they had received. A large number of them were completely new to the service, whereas others had established relationships with Mind.

All participants we spoke to had attended online groups or workshops. A small number of participants had also sought support from Mind's wellbeing line and Crisis Café's.

Participants also spoke of the incredible support they had received from individual staff members and volunteers. For some people this person-centered support had been the most effective.

Participants reflected on the service and support received from Mind;

‘...honestly this service I've been looking for years and haven't managed to get as far as I am now, that's why I find it invaluable and I wouldn't want to miss it, it's like gold dust...’

‘...The Recovery College has been amazing. That has really changed everything for the better, that has been brilliant, because everyone is so like minded and kind and if you are having a bad day, they are all there to support you; to go ‘what's wrong? It's OK to feel like this, it's fine, what can we do to help you?...’

‘Mind is a valuable service for so many people. It really is. I don't know what we'd do without it. I think that one of the things that is so significant about Mind is that resources available to people within the mental health system...is very, very limited and people feel cut off and so to have (names four staff members) at the end of the phone is invaluable. It's just a valuable, valuable thing. It's incredible.’

‘...That's a fantastic contribution that Mind has made to my mental health and the others I'm sure that (attend the same) session ...’

‘...(the Recovery College)... is very useful, can talk about your problems and what you are feeling and people seem to know and give you good advice, that's very good...’

Highlights

Mind published a weekly timetable of support groups, workshops and courses. Here participants reflect on some of their favourite sessions;

Make, Mend and Motivate

‘...I like being arty crafty and sharing ideas with others. You really do escape from reality for a couple of hours. You start off feeling really rubbish and then through this group with people talking and sharing stuff you start to feel better in those two hours...’

The Wellbeing Line

‘...the wellbeing line thoroughly supported me. When I've had concerns about people Mind does get on it. They do call them and make sure they feel supported...’

MIND'S SUPPORT

Creative Writing

'...reason why I've ended up in the writing group as opposed to the others is probably because not only is it just an outlet it's a fun thing... I wasn't feeling too well this week. I hadn't slept the night before and I was thinking of swerving it, missing it but when it came (to the time) I really wanted to do it so I got on there despite the fact that I felt horrible.'

Carers' Group

'...It's definitely been the Carers support group session just making sure you're not alone. You're not the only person that has these responsibilities on their shoulders and there are other people who are in similar situations...'

Pilates and Thai Chi

'...I absolutely love the Thai Chi. I feel like a Samuri Warrior...'

'...I find the Pilates very good because it's helping with my leg...' (This participant suffered an injury during the pandemic.)



WELLBEING

The people we spoke to used a number of strategies to manage their mental health and wellbeing. Participants engaged in arts and craft projects, did regular exercise, connected more with nature and spent time gardening. Others practised Mindfulness or Pilates and downloaded wellbeing apps.

For some participants this was a rekindling of an earlier interest or past time and for others it was an entirely new enterprise. Some activities were initiated from joining a Mind group, whereas others were practiced separately or independently.

Art & crafts

Here participants reflect on the benefit of their creative pursuits;

‘...I have found my creative side through this pandemic. I’ve been creative before but I never connected with it the way that I connected with it this time round. So that’s been really helpful...’

‘...I really got into photography again after taking a break from it for awhile and I got loads of photos from my garden...’

‘...Getting back into music... I can’t read it or write it but I play it from my head...I’m good at covering because I can hear the notes and basically figure out where they’re meant to go. It helped a lot especially when my words weren’t going right and I couldn’t say how I felt but I could play how I felt...’

‘...I’ve been doing a lot of crocheting and knitting. I do my jobs indoors... I’m always fixing things...’

Connecting with nature

Participants also spoke of the role the natural world played in supporting them;

‘I’ve actually really got into gardening. I find being outdoors in my garden, doing things with my hands and focusing on something else really relaxing ...Last year I grew loads of vegetables... I grew loads of sunflowers as they’re one of my favourite flowers and they made me happy...’

‘...I found great solace in nature...Nature took me to a place where I was allowed to cry, it was very safe...The beauty of nature brought something to my world which I wasn’t able to access any other way...’

Exercise

Participants also spoke about the benefit of exercise;

‘...I’ve had my dancing... (and) my dance classes and that’s been quite a big support for me... it stopped physically but I did it on zoom...’

‘...You could only go out for a walk which I did every day with my husband and whilst we were going round we were taking notes of everybody who was doing some work, to give us interest in the walks...it kept us out, it occupied our minds.’

WELLBEING

Structure

Participants also discussed the importance of having a structure to their day to help maintain their mental health and wellbeing. For some attending regular Mind groups provided that structure and gave order and a sense of purpose to the day.

One participant described the sense of distress they experienced by the interruption to their routine;

‘...My routine has gone completely out of the window. My routine is very important to me, it’s like there’s a clock inside my head and every second I’m late for something feels like an hour to me and I get very distressed when my schedule is interrupted...’

and another on the valuable role Mind played in providing daily structure;

‘...And also it gives me something, to go ‘Right. It’s that day, I’ve got my class...right you’ve got to get up, get in the shower, get dressed, pay attention, use your brain, engage and not be lonely, isolated...’



WORKING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Some participants worked through the pandemic, with one opening up their own online business. One participant working in retail explained that despite the challenges around socially distancing, working gave them a sense of purpose and pride and a reason to leave the house.

‘I’m not a key worker, I’m not something like a paramedic or police or fire (person) but yeah of course I am. There’s a realisation that you are a key worker – important, and that’s a good feeling...’

They go on to explain;

‘...so many people perhaps haven’t been able to work or perhaps lost their jobs. So at least I haven’t had that to worry about.

Another talks of issues around work life balance and the difficulty of separating from work when working from home;

‘...obviously you don’t just switch off when you have finished your job, but at least it’s a different actual physical place...



WIDER HEALTH ECONOMY

During the pandemic access to medical help became problematic. Although people were allowed to leave home for medical reasons, many appointments and procedures were cancelled and only the most urgent interventions took place. Most GP and other front line services went on line. Many people were frightened to attend hospital for fear of contracting Covid-19 and visitors were not allowed into hospitals, hospices or care homes.

One participant describes their distress at struggling with some physical health issues alone and the limited access to professional intervention;

‘...Things were going on prior to Covid, but the main thing Covid has done has been increased the lack of medical help I could have got because I was suffering from chronic asthma...Basically it’s been quite horrendous to be left on your own with limited guidance from what you can get over the phone and kinda trying to face medical symptoms you’re not sure of...and not being able to access any help...’

Another describes the difficulties at not being able to visit a family member with dementia in hospital;

‘I have tried to do Zoom with my husband in hospital, but that’s not actually been very successful, because I can’t visit him; we haven’t visited him for months now -we’re not allowed to - but it (Zoom) didn’t work really, not with him.’

And another the traumatic experience of discovering their husband unconscious;

‘...I found my husband unconscious so I then had to phone an ambulance and I didn’t know whether I would see him again and not being able to visit that was quite traumatic...’



COMMUNITY SUPPORT

We spoke to people about other community support they had received. People referred to support from family, friends, neighbours, the church and other community groups, as well as from the local council. For some, this community support had been helpful but in some cases it proved disappointing.

Some talked of having supportive neighbours;

‘...My neighbour is very good next door. In fact she’s been in today and got round the places I can’t reach... and cleaned...’

others at the importance of keeping in touch with friends;

‘...I phone up all the people I know and chat to them so I’m going to have a massive phone bill actually. I phone everybody...’

One participant talked of the help they received from the local council with their shopping;

‘...Bexley came forward and said if we couldn’t get a slot (for an internet shop) you could ring up and get someone to do our shopping for us...it came at the right time because you got to the stage where you couldn’t be bothered to go and queue to get into the supermarket...we used the Bexley offer quite a few times and we were very grateful for this...’

Another participant spoke of their interactions with church;

‘...I’m on regular Zoom meetings...which have been really helpful, seeing people and praying about things and that kind of stuff. It’s a very big part of my life...’



SUPPORTING DIGITALLY

The digital platforms proved invaluable to Mind to ensure support was still available to those in need when face-to-face sessions were not possible. Some people we spoke to found the shift to using Zoom perfectly straightforward but for other participants it was more difficult and they needed support to access it.

Here some participants describe their initial reactions to using the digital platforms and the support that they received from Mind in Bexley and East Kent to enable access to them;

‘...I was apprehensive about doing it and to start with, I thought ‘No’ but since I’ve tried it... I’ve got the hang of it now and I feel comfortable with it...’

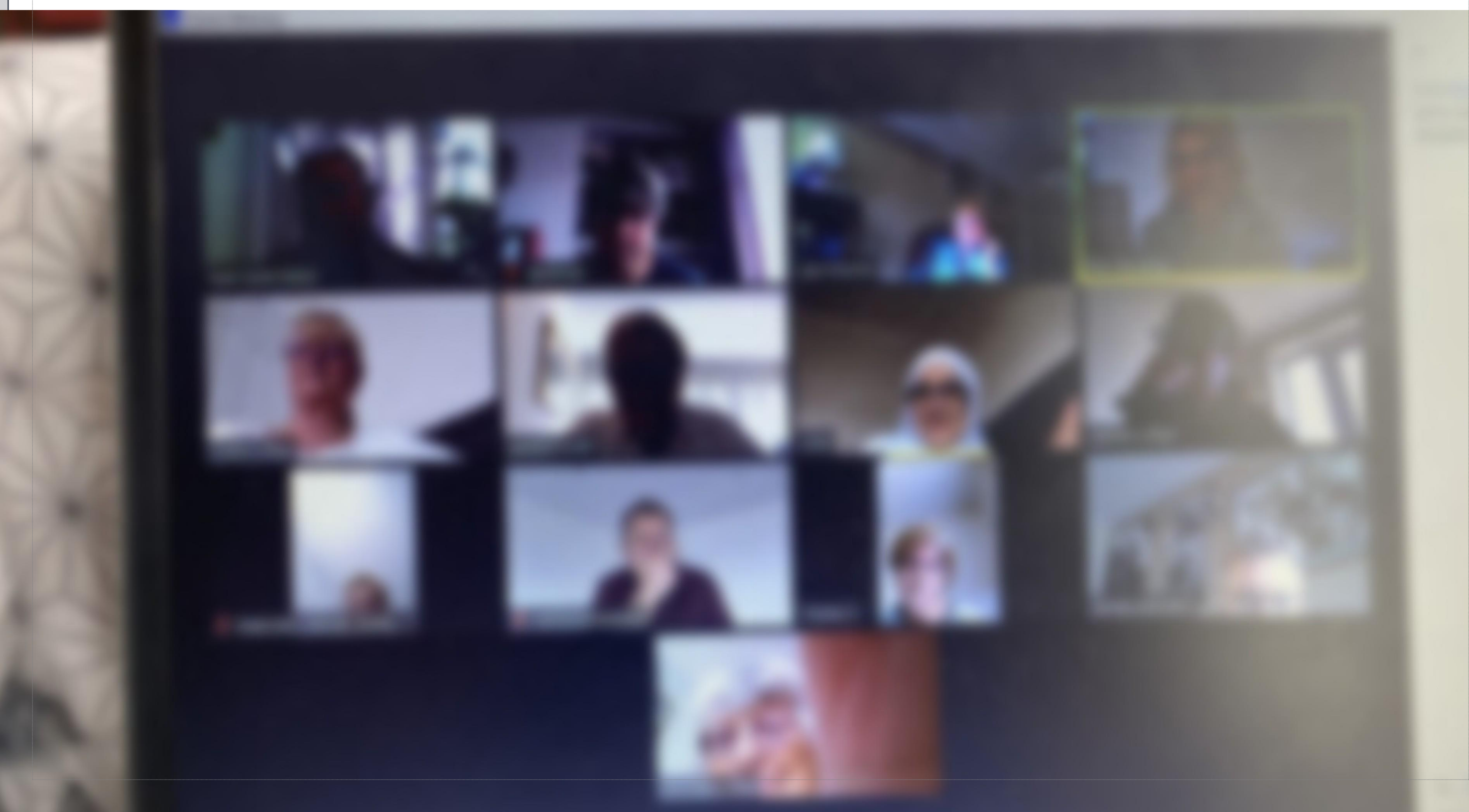
‘...I got my granddaughter to come and set it up because I didn’t know how to do that at all and then as a starting point (names a staff member) showed me. They’d be on the phone while I was trying to access a session...’

‘...I didn’t know how to do it and bless (names a staff member) spent about maybe an hour explaining to me on the phone what to do. The only way I can get in is if they send me a message. I get the message up, I touch the blue bit and then I can get into the zoom meeting...’

Some participants discussed the pros and cons of virtual activities as opposed to in person ones. Some participants considered it as a positive and for others a poor substitute to face-to-face contact;

‘...On the plus side what has been very welcome is being able to be on a Zoom group and sit in the pitch black of anonymity until I was ready to engage...’

‘...it doesn’t make up for the physical contact of people, it helps, but it doesn’t make up for you actually going out and mixing with people...’



GOING FORWARD

Those we spoke to for this project highlight some of the challenges encountered and the coping mechanisms they used to support themselves. The strength, creativity and resilience of participants have been inspiring. The openness with which people have shared their stories has been humbling.

The support Mind in Bexley and East Kent provided to the local community, as evidenced from these conversations, has been overwhelmingly positive and the value of which cannot be underestimated.

This exhibition and accompanying report act as a lasting testimony to both the individual stories, the organisation and the staff and volunteers who provided unwavering support for the local community at this unprecedented time.

Our world has changed, but Mind in Bexley and East Kent's commitment to do everything they can to support better mental health has never been stronger.

We want to further develop and expand our digital offerings and re-think the way that we deliver many of our services going forward. The use of digital will be a primary part of this and we will continue to work with trustees, staff and volunteers to ensure that no one should face a mental health problem on their own.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

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We would like to thank everyone who took time to share their stories with us.



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