

OLDER VOICES OF THE PANDEMIC: WHAT LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN HAS BEEN LIKE FOR YOU.



Older Voices of the Pandemic: What life under lockdown has been like for you.

Growing Older Under Lockdown, Hourglass (2020).

“I’m not only very bored but very lonely.”

In order to better understand the human voices behind the data, and hear the lived experiences of older people during the pandemic, subsequent lockdowns and periods of restrictions, Hourglass commissioned a UK-wide poll seeking the views of older people.

Listening to the experiences of older people enables Hourglass to delve into different factors and encounters separate from any personal understanding of the pandemic and lockdowns, and provides a unique “heard” personality in a way that raw quantitative data does not. As a form of mixed method analysis, both qualitative open-ended questions and quantitative data provide Hourglass the means to better understand the experience of both older people in general, and older victim-survivors of abuse and mistreatment.

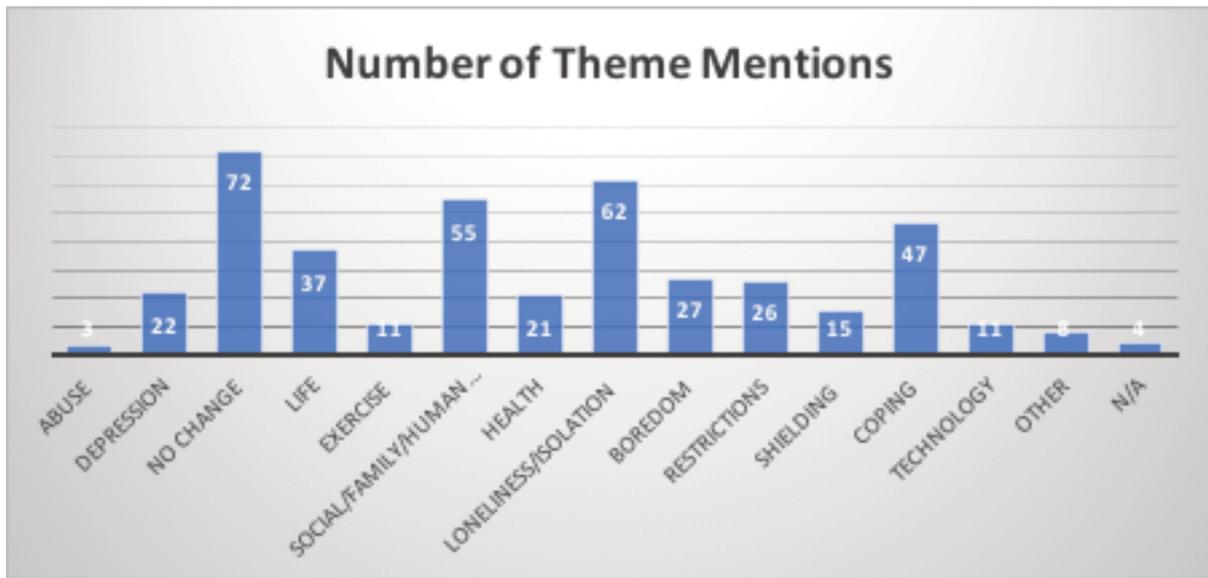
“Growing Old Under Lockdown” (2020) asked people over the age of 70 to answer a qualitative and open-ended question about how life under lockdown had been for them:

“Please can you tell us a bit about what life under lockdown has been like for you? For example, have you had to shield from other people? Have you felt isolated? Or has life continued pretty much as usual?”

216 individual responses were received to this question and these responses were coded and analysed by looking at the main themes mentioned throughout. Some specific views kept recurring:

- Abuse
- Depression/mental health
- No Change
- Life
- Exercise
- Social / family / human contact
- Health
- Loneliness / isolation
- Boredom
- Restrictions
- Shielding
- Coping
- Technology

Most responses saw multiple themes mentioned, and following their division into themes, were further analysed via the prism of positive, negative, and neutral responses. 196 themed responses were positive, 166 were negative, and 59 were neutral.



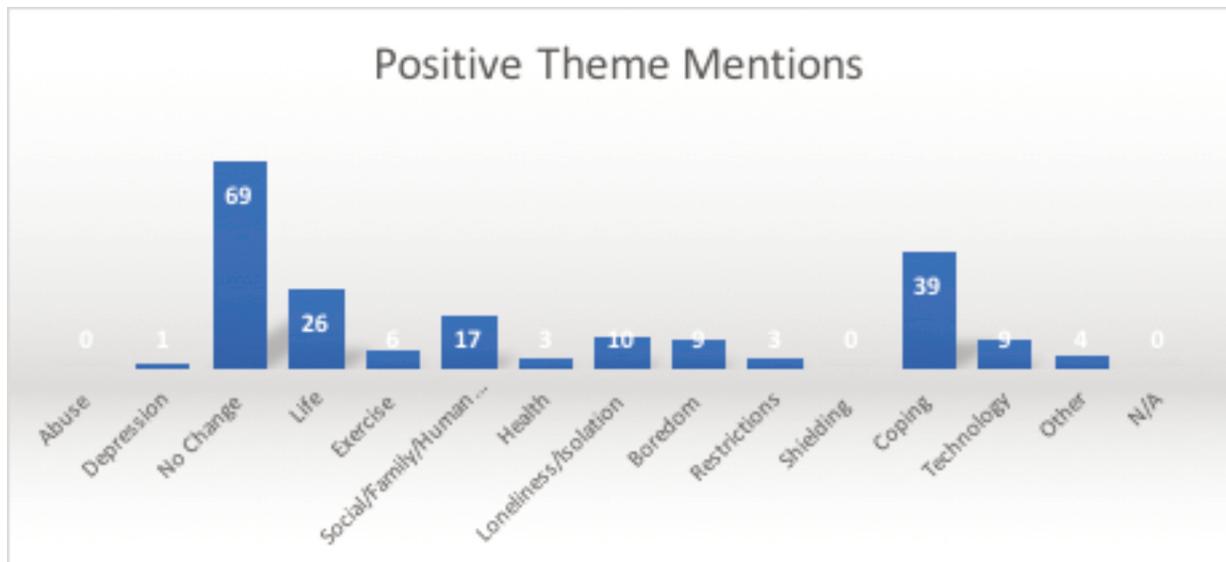
Most Common Themes

No Change

Surprisingly, responses that indicated themes of “no change” were the most common, being seen in 33.2% of all responses (n=72.) These responses mentioned the lack of difference between the pandemic lockdown and their normal life.

“Apart from distancing, nothing has changed,” or “apart from my role as a Nordic Walking Instructor nothing has changed.”²

As noted, themes were also further analysed through the categories of positive, negative, or neutral. 95.8% of “no change” responses were positive (n=69) and the rest were neutral (n=3), there were no negative “no change” responses.



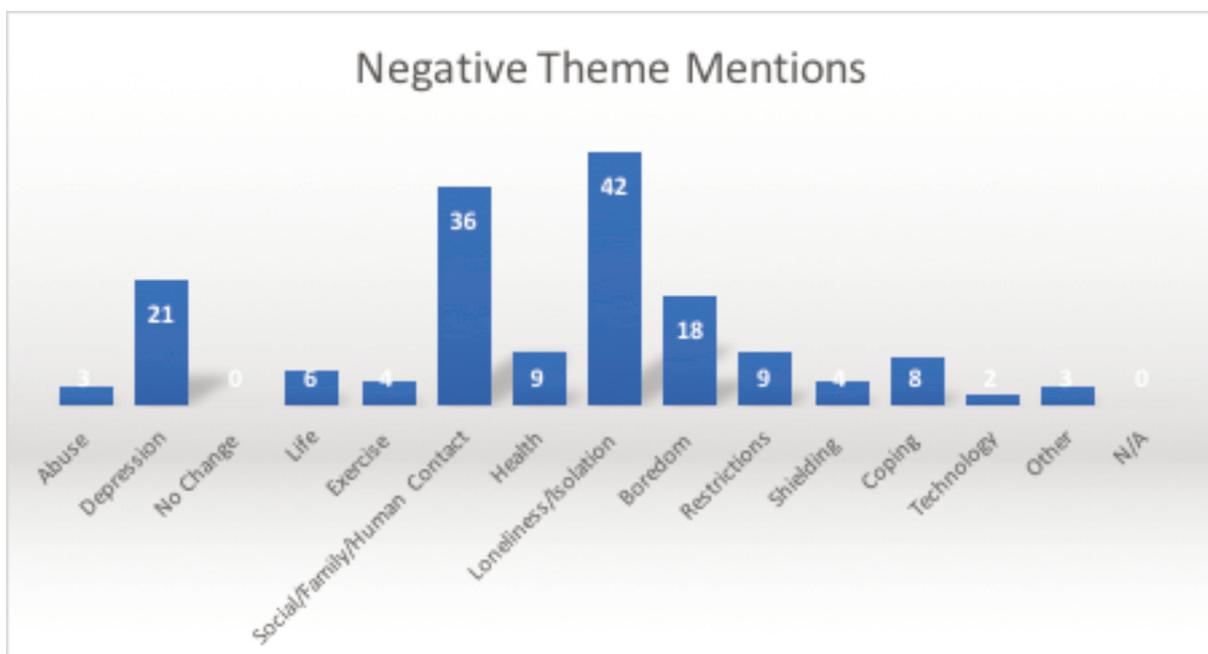
Loneliness/Isolation

The second most common theme that emerged from the polling data was “loneliness/isolation, which was seen in 28.7% of all responses (n=62). These were further broken down into 16.1% (n=10) positive, 67.7% (n= 42) negative, and 16.1% (n=10) neutral. As is explored below, loneliness/isolation of older people during the pandemic has been a key concern and a number of older isolated voices were identified from the polling data. What is striking from these comments is that while many highlighted that they have felt lonelier during the pandemic and lockdown, a large number of respondents seemed to indicate they are generally as lonely and isolated as they were in their pre-pandemic life:

‘Life has gone on as if no virus existed. Older people self-isolate, young people carry on with their full lives.’³

One respondent showed concern for the long-term impacts of social distancing measures, and the fear of greater stigma being attached to older age, especially when normal life returns.

“Being alone all day is fine. The biggest problem is when you see your grandchildren and they are not allowed to come near you. They look at you as if you have two heads because they are told to stay away from you. Will they come near you after restrictions are lifted?...they might not be happy being near us”⁴

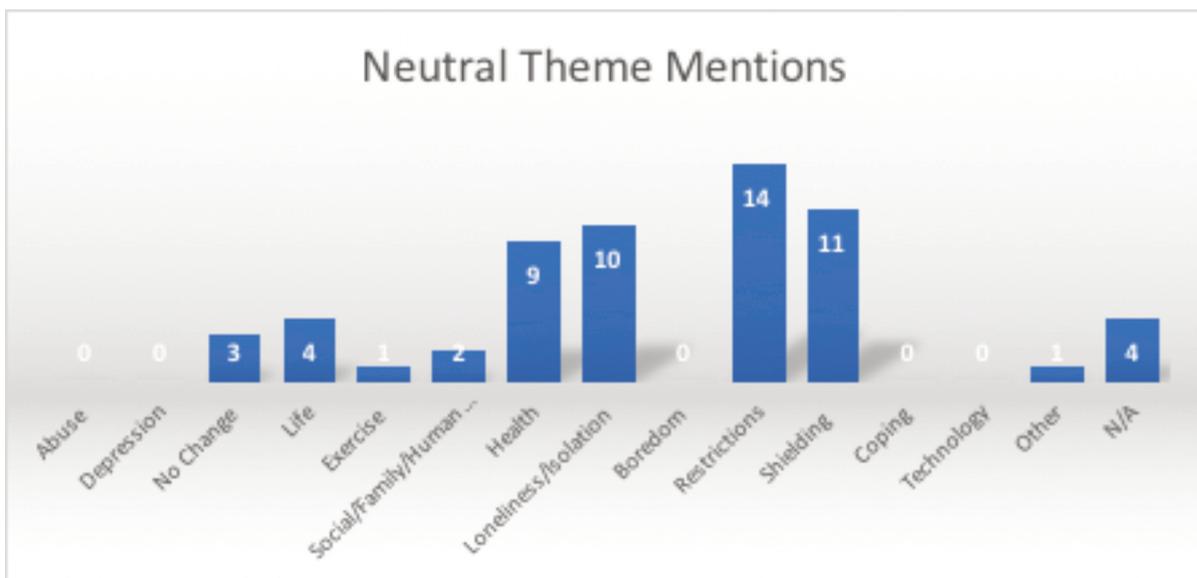


Social / Family / Human Contact

The next most common theme mentioned in responses was “social/family/human contact.” This was seen in 25.5% of responses (n=55), with the vast majority of answers being negative. (30.9% (n=17) positive, 65.5% (n= 36) negative, and 3.6% (n=2) neutral.) Unsurprisingly many responses referred to missing contact with sons and daughters, and grandchildren, although a number mentioned the positive aspects of close family contact and helping them day to day during the lockdown.

“I have still been shopping wearing a mask and latex gloves but otherwise I find it very hard not seeing my family. I miss my great grandson who is only 2 but he speaks to us on FaceTime, so he doesn’t forget us. I miss my friends as we used to meet every week. I’m not only very bored but very lonely.”⁵

“I live alone in sheltered accommodation and enjoy my own company. I have lovely neighbours and am looking forward to socializing with them again. I keep in touch with friends and family via the phone. I am luckily very content at present.”⁶



Coping

The next most common theme seen mentioned in the responses was “coping”. This was seen in 21.8% (n=47) of responses, with the majority of answers being positive. 83% (n=39) positive, 17% (n=8) were negative, there were no neutral responses. Responses that included this theme generally referred to how easy or how difficult respondents were finding life during the pandemic and these ranged from those who found coping with the restrictions and regulations almost enjoyable, thanks to extended time, money saved, and ability to focus on other activities.

“I have stayed at home for the last few months. This is no hardship as we have a large house and a pleasant garden with a summerhouse and enough money not to worry about anything financial and can order anything we want for delivery. I actually enjoy it.”

“No problem at all. It has saved me a lot of money as my monthly holidays including a cruise all cancelled also all the 34 concerts operas ballets and plays, I had booked to attend.”

“It has been fine. I have mainly enjoyed having more time to do things at home.”

“Thoroughly enjoyed it - live alone but not lonely; lots of reading in the sun; long walks with dog; working (at a Primary school) a few days per fortnight.”⁷

However, there were those who were struggling more.

“Difficult”

“It is a little tougher.”⁸

Life

Similar to the theme “coping” were responses that specifically mentioned “life”. This theme was seen in 17.1% (n=37) of responses, with the majority of theme responses being positive. 70.3% (n=26) were positive, 16.2% (n=6) negative, and 10.8% (n=4) were neutral. Generally, responses linked back to the notion of trying to keep life as “unchanged” or “normal” as it had been before.

“I have tried to make life as normal as I could.”

“As a fit 71-year-old I have tried to continue life as pre-lockdown. I have not felt isolated and have enjoyed resurrecting old hobbies.”⁹

Negative themed responses related back to life being changed due to other factors linked to the pandemic or lockdown.

“Life has certainly changed stuck indoors bored to the hilt unable to visit daughter and grandchildren”¹⁰

Boredom and Restrictions

Comparable numbers of responses focused on boredom (12.4% n=27) and restrictions (12% n=26). For boredom, 66.7% (n=18) were negative and 33.3% (n=9) were positive, while responses on restrictions saw 11.5% (n=3) positive, 34.6% negative (n=9), and 53.8% (n=14) neutral. As can be seen, the majority of boredom responses were negative and were in many cases linked to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

“Boring and isolated. Have not seen family and friends and are missing them (especially grandchildren.)”

“Boring and lonely.”

“A little boring and missing contact with family.”¹¹

Although some noted that they felt bored but not lonely or isolated.

“A bit boring have not felt isolated.”

Other negative theme responses mentioned mental health and vulnerability to abuse.

“It is very boring living under lockdown and makes vulnerable people more likely to be abused.”

“Long, boring and mentally affected.”¹²

Positive boredom theme responses mentioned keeping themselves busy.

“Apart from using the supermarket and not being able to travel or holiday there has been no major restrictions, have a large house and large garden so have kept busy.”¹³

The majority of restriction theme responses on the other hand were neutral, and generally mentioned lockdown restrictions in an offhand way in conjunction with other themes.

“Apart from not being able to do our own shopping nothing much to worry about except having to keep social distance going for some time yet. I believe we need to.”

“We have used social distancing but apart from that life has continued pretty much as before. I have not felt isolated.”

“It is very peaceful since there are less cars driving about however no one practices social distancing so you end up having to constantly dodge them.”¹⁴

The restriction theme responses that were categorised as positive or negative referred to opportunities either being taken away because of restrictions (negative).

“Lockdown has been a big change in our lifestyle, not going shopping, not playing golf.”

Or restrictions not making much of a difference to daily life (positive.)

“As I have been retired for 14 years, I have no problem with lockdown, have been rearranging my garden.”¹⁵

Health and Depression

Like boredom and restrictions, comparable numbers of respondents mentioned themes of health (9.7% n=21) and depression/mental health (10.1% n=22) within their answers. For depression/mental health, 4.5% (n=1) were positive, 95.5% (n=21) were negative, and none were neutral. While for health responses, the relative majority were neutral or negative 42.9% for both (n= 9), with less being deemed positive 14.3% (n=3.)

The singular positive depression/mental health theme mention expressed surprise at their calm and relaxed demeanour during the pandemic.

“Have tried to social distance at all times; difficult in not seeing family and grandchildren close up. Surprisingly, I have felt calm and reasonably relaxed. Catching up on reading and music.”

However, the vast majority of depression/mental health theme mentions were negative, focusing on aspects of the pandemic/lockdown including health problems which had caused stress or anxiety.

“Due to health condition, I have been in lock down since the middle of February. Only been out every 3 weeks to the GP surgery for blood test. I see a lady once a week when she brings my shopping. Feel depressed at times not so lonely as I have a dog as a companion. Will be glad when i can go out and see the local people again.”¹⁶

“Having nothing to look forward to” was a common negative response, and in some cases poor mental health stemming from pandemic lockdown conditions appeared to lead to xenophobic and potentially racist attitudes and remarks.

“I am extremely depressed because my family were due to come for Easter and couldn't. I am disabled and prior to lockdown I was going to the gym to try and increase my confidence. Now I can barely walk. Our holiday has had to be cancelled. I just feel there's nothing to look forward to and all because of a country whose citizens have filthy and bizarre eating habits.”¹⁷

As well as connections to health themes, negative depression/mental health responses also were found in conjunction with expressions of negative loneliness/isolation themes.

“I have felt lonely depressed and forgotten.”

“It feels a little lonely and depressing environment which is not helpful to anyone as well as other problem. Food shopping getting other necessities.”

“I’ve had no social life which has impacted my mental health severely.”¹⁸

Other negative responses mentioned a worry about economic downturns, and a few noted the immense effect that the mental toughness of the pandemic and lockdown was having on them.

“Life is pretty anxious and scary under lockdown with imminent economic downturn.”

“Living nightmare.”

“Long boring and mentally affected.”

“My life has been hell.”¹⁹

As noted, the relative majority of health themed responses were either neutral or negative. Like neutral restrictions theme responses, neutral health theme responses mentioned health in a background or offhand way in conjunction with other themes.

“I have asthma and my husband is diabetic and recovering from a heart attack”

“My husband and I have been in total lockdown as he is in the top risk category. As we are both retired we miss enjoying trips in the countryside but apart from that we are very lucky to have good neighbours and a local shop which delivers. We miss our son spending the summer with us but we look forward to next year in anticipation of a vaccine being made available to us.”

“My wife and I are both over 70 and my wife is in a high risk category. She has not been out at all and I go out once a week to get groceries and once a month to get medication. Se both do a lot of gardening to get some exercise.”²⁰

Negative health themed responses on the other hand, often mentioned a fear of making health related problems worse through contact with other people, or a fear of others breaking the restrictions and bringing health issues to the respondents.

“Fear of family ignoring isolation and spreading Covid 19.”

“Avoiding people as much as possible because of underlying health issues.”

A number of negative health themed responses also illustrated the challenges of formal and informal caring during the pandemic, and how it has affected the ability of respondents to enjoy activities or life.

“Because my husband has Lewy Body Dementia I already had to (mostly) stay in with him. He has carers who help with him twice a day they have to wear face masks. I would like to be able to go out for a walk or to shop but I cannot ask anyone else to stay with him at this time. Other than this my life has stayed much the same.”

Least Common Themes

Abuse

Surprisingly, considering the revelations on personal experiences of abuse and mistreatment seen in the rest of the “Growing Older Under Lockdown” survey,²¹ as well as Hourglass’s increased number of calls on abuse during the lockdown,²² the least common theme identified in respondents’ answers was abuse. Mentioned in only three responses (1.39%), expectedly all of these were negative (100%)

Two victim-survivor respondents mentioned personal abuse by neighbours, (3.2% of our cases from the Hourglass Helpline in 2020). Neither of these victim-survivors stated what kind of abuse they were suffering from, however, the semi-personal nature of answering a survey might have contributed to this.

“Abuse by neighbours.”

“I have been in lockdown since the beginning. My family shop for me plus I have deliveries. I live in a block of 4 flats and I have had problems from the tenant above. I have had abuse from the tenant and also from her visiting 16 yr old brother. No one has tried to invade my isolation though.”²³

While another respondent mentioned the long-term verbal and domestic abuse of their mother, and how the lockdown restrictions were preventing them from seeing/assisting their parents.

“I haven’t been able to see my elderly parents both 86 years old due to this virus. My father is verbally abusive to my mother and has been as long I’ve been alive. My elder sister does her best to care for my mother.”²⁴

Other and N/A

8 theme mentions were categorised as “other” as they did not adequately fit into any of the existing categories but were not numerous enough to warrant the creation of new categories for them.

Some examples of these responses include:

“It’s been pretty.”²⁵

“It’s what you make it.”

“It has been a life of self-reflection and re-prioritising of things in general.”

“Very quiet.”²⁶

As well as “other” themes, there were 4 responses that did not fit within the remit of the question asked, either these were from those under 70, were one/two word answers which didn’t explain anything, or in one case a comment about prawns and bed and breakfasts.

“I live with parents and they are both over 70.”

“Just do.”

“How to get out of the sea emperors base with a prawn bed and breakfast in the morning but not sure if you have a room available room for them.”²⁷

Technology and Exercise

Identical numbers of theme mentions for technology and exercise were identified in the analysis, both being apparent in 5.1% (n=11) of responses. For technology, positive themes were seen in 81.8% of technology mentions (n=9,) and negative themes were seen in 18.2% of technology mentions (n=2,) no neutral themes were identified. For exercise, positive themes were observed in 54.5% (n=6) of exercise mentions, negative themes in 36.4% (n=4) of exercise mentions, and neutral themes in 9.1% (n=1) of exercise mentions.

Technology mentions that were positive mainly revolved around technology enabling contact with family members and friends during lockdown and helping prevent loneliness and isolation. The types of technologies mentioned included.

- Phone
- Internet
- Social Media
- FaceTime
- Skype
- Zoom

“From not going outside my property my life is pretty much as usual I keep in touch with my relatives and friends using phone and internet. And I shop via the internet.”

“Had to isolate initially because of my age but then was classified as vulnerable so as placed on shielding list. Life has dramatically changed as I've been unable to see friends though have been able to speak to some friends via social media”

“I have still been shopping wearing a mask and latex gloves but otherwise I find it very hard not seeing my family. I miss my great grandson who is only 2 but he speaks to us on FaceTime so he doesn't forget us. I miss my friends as we used to meet every week. I'm not only very bored but very lonely.”

“I haven't been shopping and at the beginning I found it hard to get slots with the supermarkets for deliveries[sic]. At the beginning it was[sic] quite fun to do my classes through Zoom or Skype but now I am missing the closeness of being able to hug your children. I have a dog and a horse and live in the country so I still have to get out and walk my dog and feed my horse so that didn't change. I don't have to shield but I just don't want to go shopping and may be catch the virus and then spread it to other people without realising it.”²⁸

While negative responses were less to do with the technology itself, but the problems and issues in trying to utilise it within the midst of a pandemic.

“I have to shield but I just have to get on with life what I will say trying to get online shopping and delivery is very difficult also paying for delivery if you do get one.”²⁹

Positive exercise theme mentions on the other hand were more focused on the positive that exercise as a means to get out of the house had been able to continue throughout the pandemic and lockdown.

“Life has been tolerable. Our family have done our supermarket shopping on a weekly basis. We have gone out for a walk weather permitting once a day. The last eleven weeks have passed without any major problems.”

“Very little difference to my normal life since my wife passed away last year. I still get out for my shopping but a bit less often now and buy more things in one bigger shop. I’m not able to hug my grandchildren (18 & 20) at the moment but I can still wave to them as they live a few doors away from me I also have a nice garden so can get fresh air as well as still going on my morning walk of about 40 minutes (2 miles). So life goes on c’est la vie.”

“Yes, I’m going on my bike.”³⁰

Negative themes also showed the opposite of the above comments. For a number of respondents, exercise during the pandemic lockdown was either curtailed or lacking.

“Stressful. Lacks real exercise also more worried due to inability to freedoms make us ill.”

“Because my husband has Lewy Body Dementia I already had to (mostly) stay in with him. He has Carers who help with him twice a day they have to wear face masks. I would like to be able to go out for a walk or to shop but i cannot ask anyone else to stay with him at this time. Other than this my life has stayed much the same.”³¹

Shielding

While this theme could have been subsumed into the health or restrictions themes, because of the number of specific mentions of the word “shielding”, as well as its particular mention within the question, it was considered appropriate to explore this theme on its own. Cited in 15 (6.9%) of responses, no shielding comment was analysed as positive, instead being observed as negative in 4 (26.7%) and as neutral in 11 (73.3%) theme mentions.

Negative comments raised the difficulties with shielding, including being isolated from family members and friends.

“Pretty much as usual except struggle for shopping slots and shielding from family which is really hard.”

“Very depressed and shielding because of health reasons. Isolated and feeling forgot about.”

“Yes, i have felt isolated because i haven’t been able to see my girlfriend and i am currently shielding.”³²

While neutral mentions merely stated that the respondent was shielding, without identifying/raising any positive or negative connotations from the phenomena.

“I have shielded myself from my elderly friends.”

“I have shielded under lock down.”

“I have had to shield.”³³

Conclusion

The responses to the question *“Please can you tell us a bit about what life under lockdown has been like for you? For example, have you had to shield from other people? Have you felt isolated? Or has life continued pretty much as usual?”* have enabled Hourglass to gain a clearer comprehension and understanding of the day to day lived experiences of older people during the pandemic and lockdown.

Some of the findings have not been what we would have expected, especially the high proportion of responses categorised to “no change,” and the almost non-existent mention of abuse and mistreatment within the responses. It is both heartening and unsettling to see that a relative majority deemed that there was a lack of change between their normal life and their life during the pandemic. While the majority of “no change” answers were positive, questions need to be answered especially about the social dynamics and networks that older people have access to, as well as broader questions around living conditions.

Lack of mentions of abuse and mistreatment may be down to the public facing nature of the survey, and as mentioned above do not correspond to the data on abuse received in the rest of the polling data, nor Hourglass’ own helpline figures.

High positive respondent mentions of “coping” are also surprising but encouraging, however this may be down to the demographics of the surveyed group. Respondents who appear to be monetarily comfortable, own their own house and have a garden, or have close family ties, are more likely to cope easier with the strains of the pandemic lockdown than those who are from a lower socio-economic group, are renters, do not have access to private outdoor space, or do not have close family ties.

Negative responses focused on loneliness/isolation, and family/friend/human contact were more anticipated yet disconcerting. Loneliness can have a dramatic impact on the lives and health of older people; our polling data suggests that as soon as the pandemic is over, immediate socialisation is necessary for a large proportion of older people. Struggles with depression/mental health also appeared to be connected to other themes, predominately isolation/loneliness, and lack of family/friend/human contact.

Comments about restrictions and shielding seemed to view them in a more neutral light, or as an extension of typical life, something that needed to be overcome, but which wasn’t positive or negative. While technology was viewed in a largely positive light, as a mean to reconnect with family and friends, as well as a way to gain access to food and other goods.

While these themes and respondents' answers are useful at enlarging our awareness and understanding of older people's experiences during the pandemic and lockdown, they are only the first step, and imminent academic and third sector research into the strands and trends extrapolated and identified is both necessary and key to growing this knowledge.

¹Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

³Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

⁴Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

⁵Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

⁶Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

⁷Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

⁸Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

⁹Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹⁰Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹¹Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹²Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹³Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹⁴Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹⁵Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹⁶Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹⁷Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹⁸Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

¹⁹Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²⁰Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²¹ 6.8% of respondents noted that they themselves had been abused as an older person, if we extrapolate this out into the number of over 65 in the UK (11,989,322) It would suggest a number of 791,295 victims of elder abuse. Considering age and the fact that people could tick more than one option: 21.6% of respondents either have personal experience of abuse as an older person (65+) or know someone else who has been abused. This would mean that across the UK, at least 2,675,000 people over the age of 65 have been abused as older people.

²² To fully examine the impact of coronavirus on the abuse and mistreatment of older people, Hourglass compared their Helpline data from the first six months of the pandemic (April-September 2020) to the same period in 2019. Calls relating to abuse perpetrated by a neighbour doubled in this period, from 3% of calls to 6% of calls. There was also an uptick in calls relating to a grandson/granddaughter, 3% to 4%. We received fewer calls concerning financial abuse in this period than in April-September 2019, but a higher number of calls for each of the other types of abuse (physical, psychological, neglect and sexual abuse). Calls relating to sexual abuse, although still the lowest proportion of enquiries, doubled in 2020 compared to 2019.

²³Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²⁴Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²⁵Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²⁶Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²⁷Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²⁸Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

²⁹Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

³⁰Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

³¹Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

³²Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.

³³Hourglass., 2020. Growing Old under Lockdown in the UK.



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