

In a confined space, we can experience liberation

New Zealand's Level 4 nationwide lockdown on March 25th 2020 brought uncertainty; panic buying and a bunch of ecstatic classmates looking forward to being away from school. Even if I was entombed within the comforts of my own home, I was able to adjust to the environment of online learning that certainly would've been a challenge for most students. It's incredible in this age of technology that we were still able to connect with our friends; family; teachers and coworkers.

Whilst some may have thrived during the lockdown, it's undeniable that this pandemic has cleaved apart communities and our expectations of 2020. However, COVID-19 isn't alone - issues with people's mental health continue to be the dominating pathogens that destroy our wellbeing.

And this pathogen has no vaccine.

Although the lockdown disrupted my usual routine, the first few weeks soared with flying colours. However, despite being an introvert indoors, my mornings became a struggle. My enthusiasm for school was soon sucked dry by the white walls of my home. Soon, I became vulnerable to the pathogens of negative thoughts.

The catch - I was already infected before the pandemic.

Old wounds were being reopened by painful memories of primary school bullying; sardonic remarks from relatives; the bitter-sweet lies of "friends"; being rejected by my crush, and moments when I contemplated closing the book of my life.

Despite the lockdown incubating my "mental pathogens", it also presented me with a silver lining that made me thrive in my confined space and even up until now.

There's never been a time in my life where my mental health hasn't nosedived. However, from the memories re-opening my wounds, I became mindful of what were feeding the pathogens. It turns out that my lack of self-esteem mixed with perfectionism established a dehumanizing mindset of myself. Whenever I looked in the mirror, I wanted to destroy the reflection staring back at me.

But if I did, I wouldn't have seen the knife in my heart.

It's often stigmatized that showing emotional vulnerability is a sign of weakness. For growing young men such as myself, this is especially reinforced. However, admitting to struggle and exercising empathy and genuineness is courageous.

Essentially, pulling the knife out is the first step to “true healing” - but is the most difficult to initiate.

Often we walk through life being distracted by temporary agents of “happiness”. But ultimately, we return to a “base level” of happiness. That’s because we’ve been hardwired to tread the hedonic treadmill - forever chasing rainbows. In actuality we should tread the path of life and not be passive looking at self-deprecating (but relatable) memes to laugh our sorrows away.

What separates the ones who triumph and the defeatists are the ones who inch the knife out. They confront their demons head on rather than run from it - ultimately stepping off the treadmill. They re-invite the pathogens threatening their mental health to understand the mechanisms of their success and exploit it to their advantage.

It’s the struggles in life that give it meaning.

Getting to a point where I am the happiest I’ve ever been, despite this calamatic year, has taken years. The “vaccine” to the pathogens constantly threatening mental health is not instantaneous. The saying “time heals all wounds” is cliché because it’s a universal truth. However, scars don’t heal, but their significance lies in that they mark the chapters of our life stories. What’s important is that we continue to discover what makes us happy, and to progress towards an ultimatum between our authenticity and societal conformity.

We cannot afford to stop, because time won’t stop for us.