

The Effects of Being Unprepared?

What did we learn about individual and society-wide preparedness for adverse events from our experience of the Covid-19 pandemic?

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic changed everyday life for people around the world as we faced a new reality. We had to rapidly work out how to live, work and socialise differently. Social media channels overflowed with posts from people re-evaluating their lives and recognising what mattered to them, their families, and wider society. The realisation that much of our daily routine was dispensable – at least for a while – came as a shock to many of us. Now, five years on, we should reflect and invest in our personal preparedness whilst the memory and experience of the Covid-19 pandemic is still relatively fresh.

Some of our responses to the Covid-19 pandemic were entirely predictable and rational, for example, people taking care of neighbours and limiting their own behaviours to protect the vulnerable. Others were predictable but irrational, for example, stockpiling pasta and panic-buying toilet rolls. The impulse to stockpile essentials for ourselves actually resulted in worsening problems such as disrupting the distribution of essential goods. Understanding what we need to survive and endure periods of lockdown could have enabled us to avoid such stark levels of unequal access to essentials – but this mind-set does not come naturally to us. Why?

We have lived relatively secure lives without facing any major shocks to our national system in the UK for many years. We are not prepared for specific adverse events as individuals, simply because we don't have to be. Unlike those living in earthquake zones, we are not trained to keep a 'grab bag' by the front door nor do we have the concept of a household survival kit on standby and ready to sustain our families in times of need.

'When we are under threat, our willingness to help each other is one of our most important assets.'

The focus is on functional capacity – ensuring that preparedness activities and effort are aligned towards a common purpose. To that end, each household should have a 'preparedness kit' to ensure people are able to manage for 72 hours without external aid.

However, defence and self-sufficiency skills in the UK are largely delivered within (and retained by) institutions, thereby implicitly transferring responsibility for outcomes onto those institutions rather than the individual. We are a society with a fragmented preparedness capability. We need to develop more of a strengths-based, collaborative approach.

Empowering citizens with training and support to create preparedness and resilience behaviours that reduce a panic response, provides authorities with breathing space to assess and respond to situations appropriately, without being distracted by meeting public needs at scale and at speed. It would also change the expectation around responsibilities during emergencies. Surely, it is for us to play a part in personal and household preparedness, as much as it is for those in authority to attend to preparedness on a national level?

Our lack of planning and foresight leads to a state of helplessness when things do go wrong. Not only are our defence and self-sufficiency skills and knowledge insufficiently honed, but we have little agreement across society as to who is responsible for getting us through.

The underlying conditions promoting the belief that things always settle ‘back to normal’ are under increasing threat of disruption or permanent change. The incidence of significant shocks to our systems is increasing, and the complexity of life means that the ripple effects, shock waves, or cascade risks of one event are often still being dealt with when the next shock comes along. We must now accept that “normal” is no longer a steady state and we must learn to live with turbulence, ambiguity, and uncertainty in our lives.

‘Preparedness is small actions in everyday life.’

Whilst this sounds pessimistic, behind it lies hope. It is possible to navigate uncertainty with a degree of security if we dedicate time and effort to identifying how to be better prepared. Working out what those actions are begins with an acceptance of how we have learned to be so unprepared.

Three simple examples help to illustrate the point:

- What would each of us do if we no longer had access to our mobile phones? Many people use their phone devices as the primary (or even the sole) means of accessing money, NHS records and prescriptions, contact names and details, travel documents, insurance paper; the list is endless. If we take a moment to think about the fragility of this device; how it can be vulnerable to power outages, breakages, loss, theft, network failure, to name but a few, we might put in place back-up solutions for accessing vital information and making essential transactions.
- Most of us remember where we were when we heard about high profile catastrophes that happen in our lifetime, for example events such as the 9/11 attacks or the Grenfell Tower fire. Taking a moment to think through the implications of being in that place (e.g., at school or at work) and experiencing a major disruption there teaches us valuable lessons in how to be prepared for the unexpected. It takes a bit of imagination, but not much else. If you’re at work and your usual means of transport home are not accessible, for example, what would you do? How would your family know that that’s what you are planning to do? What would need to be in place for that to work (public transport fare, pre-arranged pick-up points and times or arrangements for covering essential tasks you might not be able to fulfil as normal)? Family emergency planning seems tedious but removes stress and worry (not to mention a reduction in panicked calls on a communications infrastructure that is likely to be in overdrive in an emergency situation).
- Having recently lived through a period of not being able to leave our homes unless for essential reasons, what have we learnt? What was missing that caused us concern or distress (the phone number of a relative’s nearest neighbour, for example, so we could ask them to check on our loved ones in the event of not being able to reach them)? What were the things we were grateful for having, despite their presence or availability being little more than a stroke of luck (aside from pasta and toilet rolls)? Are we making sure they are always available in future – just in case? What did we learn to do differently (alternative sources of essential goods). What are we doing to remember or improve those fixes and workarounds so that we can draw on them in the future?

We can all play a part in being better prepared for major disruptions. Having strategies in place to ensure that our lives, and those of our loved ones, are impacted as little as possible is not being paranoid – it is being responsible. There is absolutely no need to wait for an invitation or an instruction, to do so.