

“FREEDOM DAY” A NEW DISCOMFORT ZONE

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FREEDOM DAY

ARE WE REALLY ASKING PEOPLE TO TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE WIDER IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH?

This pandemic is not over, but “Freedom day” is less than one week away following Boris Johnson’s announcement earlier this week. It is the day millions of people across the country have been waiting for, but many are still nervous about and perhaps with good reason? With emphasis made on being cautious, and exercising personal responsibility for our own mental and physical health and that of the public; we are about to step into the new and unknown phase of the pandemic.

While many of us will agree that caution and responsibility has been taken (to some extent) under strict lockdown conditions, the psychology driving our behaviour may mean that we find it harder to stick to the rules the longer the situation continues. This, in addition to lack of trust and clarity in our data and measures reported, leaves many of us confused with uncertainty about our future.

We are now wondering whether we should trust the data reported, and if the vaccination programme has actually changed anything.

With all of these questions the other major concern now is how, and if people will make “responsible” choices, and what the reality will actually look like for us post July 19th.

“FREEDOM DAY” A NEW DISCOMFORT ZONE

As part of lifting restrictions, many of us will have to adjust to another new normal, shifting out of what is now considered to be a comfort zone for many of us. This means another social reset that requires mental and physical adjustment.

For some, change can bring on symptoms of stress, anxiety and withdrawal. Many of us have been wondering how and when to attend our first face-to-face meetings, how to behave when seeing a loved one who is distressed and anxious, who to mix with first, when to interact with colleagues and how to just simply mix in society again. All of which has impacted our confidence and triggered various mental health and physical issues. For some this can lead to chronic conditions.

On top of the anxiety of adjusting to a new normal, a new uncertainty has risen from the announcement earlier this week. Boris Johnson emphasised that despite the relaxation of regulations, we are “expected” to act and take decisions responsibly, taking our own health and that of others into consideration.

But with many individuals already breaking rules under strict regulations, many of us are wondering what this “responsibility” will look like in reality when regulations are relaxed?

Do we still need to wear masks in public? Will our peers judge us if we decide not to obey previous rules, and visa versa, as we have seen in the news this week in relation to wearing masks in densely populated public areas such as travel and hospitality.

This uncertainty can impact us on two psychological levels: on both an individual level as well as a societal level. On an individual level, our behaviour is governed by reward principles—we are more likely to keep doing something if it is followed by a perceived reward. The prolonged lockdown phase has diluted this effect, not getting sick is no longer perceived as a reward, as many of us did not have severe symptoms in the first place. Reinforced by optimism bias, which has been intensified by high vaccination rates – “It won’t happen to me”, means that as time passes it becomes increasingly difficult to stick to the rules or act “responsibly”.

On a societal level, broader social factors come into play. When uncertainty or subconscious expectations are set instead of definitive rules, we look to others to guide our own behaviour as they set our social norms. Seeing others going to the pub, extending social bubbles and watching sports in public sites can lead to a mindset of “if they’re doing it, why can’t I?”

Most people merely obey the rules for social approval.

This means rules were and will be broken in private even if it not done in public. “Freedom day” or nationwide lockdown, rule breakers will increase more and more, day by day.

BUILDING PUBLIC TRUST: SHIFT IN MEASURING BASELINE

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been told that science and data have been leading us to where we are today—all three phases and national lockdowns have been data-driven. Three key measures that have always been quoted to us have been number of positive covid cases, hospitalisation rates and mortality rates.

MANY OF US WILL HAVE TO ADJUST TO ANOTHER NEW NORMAL

However, with 66.2% of the population fully vaccinated, causing a demonstrable reduction on the number of deaths and admissions, many of us are still worried that infection rates are rising. Why? Well – even though our context has changed, the data measures have not followed this change. The same data measures are used to paint a picture of where we are today. Continuing to lead with these measures is now creating mistrust and anxiety around us – a very sensitive topic that has arisen before.

HOW CAN WE MAKE THE SHIFT TOWARDS CREATING MORE MEANINGFUL DATA?

Given we are entering a new phase that has already bought with it more anxiety and uncertainty, the government needs to give the public a clear view on the science and data.

Focus needs to be on rebuilding and strengthening the public's trust in both the data and the people that use our data.

But how, is the next question? Given the government's position that the link between infection and mortality has been severely weakened by the vaccination campaign - we need to shift how we measure where we are.

Instead of opening our laptops looking at daily new cases, we should be inclined to look at vaccination rates, hospitalisation rates and mortality rates, which are currently at 87.2% single dose, 66.2% full dose, 1.4% and 0.08% respectively – all of which give reason for hope compared to both the previous waves. What is even more reassuring is that two doses of the vaccination provide a significant protection of 91-98% against hospitalisation caused by the delta variant, while symptomatic infection is reduced by 80%. Emphasising these figures allows us to paint a clearer picture of where we are today and feel more confident in both the data and the impact of the vaccine rollout, building hope for the future.

However, meaningful data can do more. With limited guidance on what is expected or defined as “responsible”, meaningful data should also inform our day-to-day decisions and the degree of harm we could be causing ourselves or others with the decisions we make.

One way this could be done is to include a risk stratification of behaviours.

As an example, data on top ten transmission risks could be published, in order of importance, we could use this to compare the risk of not wearing a face mask on a train to that of watching a football game with three households in the same house. This way, we could carry out our own risk assessment, and are given the tools to make responsible decisions to the best of our ability. This would also build back trust in Government through transparency.

NEXT STEPS: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND DATA-DRIVEN LENS

Although the pandemic isn't over, we should all realise that the psychological pandemic is, in many ways, just the beginning. The uncertainty in the situation, in the data and trust in the government has left many of us in a difficult place. The lack of clarity is a poor foundation for the move away from regulation to personal responsibility. The risks remain high.

As a priority, Government should provide the public with a clear data-driven view of where we are today – using appropriate measures that allow us to paint a clear picture of, and make informed decisions in, the new vaccinated context.

They need to come back to the core principle that we need to be able to trust the data, and those that we have given permission to use our data for a sustainable future.

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