

# Interviews: Living with Covid 19

We are living in very strange times, unique I would say. Talking with friends and reading Facebook postings over the last two months, I noticed certain ideas being expressed over and over. This led me to conduct a brief survey. I spoke with six women and one man: of these, three are Italians, two Americans, one Canadian, a German, and an Australian. Five live inside the walls of Lucca, and two outside. The youngest one is 35, another is 60, and the rest are in their 70s. As you can see, this is not a scientifically representative survey, which would require a wider cross-section, especially in terms of age.

I asked these people just a few questions: How will the world be different after Covid 19, or after Lockdown? Do you know anyone who has been directly affected, who has been sick or died? How do you feel in quarantine? Are you alone? Do you have a project? In the discussion below, the names have been changed for reasons of privacy.

The youngest subject, who I will call Joan, was the most optimistic. She said that after Covid people will pay more attention to others, will help each other, will buy food for those who need help. As an example, she cited an engineer in Montecarlo who has taken responsibility for 15 families, buying them groceries and paying their utility bills. She thinks that people may feel less frustrated in traffic, though they might suffer from depression or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) because of money problems. There may be more suicides. Or people might read and write more poetry.

Joan doesn't personally know anyone affected, except for the Mayor of Lucca who is now well, and her neighbour's adult children who live in Belgium. They contracted the virus but recovered without the need for a doctor.

Joan has been working on her technological skills, because she is a teacher, working online. She also participated in an online orchestral concert with the University of Pisa entitled *Distanti ma Vicini* (Far Apart yet Close Together); the conductor re-assembled each musician's individually performed part.

Having a live-in partner, she says she is not talking to the refrigerator. Though their home is small he goes out for work, so they have enough space. Sometimes they play chess.

Helga, my next subject, said, *I hope people will concentrate on their core, what matters to them, and what is essential, to shake off mere entertainment and time-fillers or embellishments.*

Her friend's uncle here in Lucca died from Covid. Helga said she has also seen the financial effect on people, especially small shops, and can sense their fears about business survival. A woman who helps her, the mother of three children, is finding life very difficult. She has no free time, no personal time.

Helga, though, feels relatively safe. She was more scared about a month ago, but now uses this time as a retreat space, to develop her art and creativity. Being married, she is not alone. They live in a shielded environment, without shortages, and have enough space and individual interests. But staying home, she says, they are missing out on the arrival of spring.

Mary, an American, compared the current situation to 9-11, World War II, and other catastrophes. She feels that we must change in order to adapt, both personally and interpersonally. Being a fairly introverted individual, the experience of being enclosed in a small apartment is not a problem, but she feels agoraphobic when she goes outside, and is missing her travels. Thanks to music, language studies, CSI, and books, Mary has enough to keep busy. When she first arrived in Lucca two months ago, she was ill and maybe she had Covid herself, but now she is

fine. Friends in Bergamo were also ill, and she was acquainted with a man in Lucca's Balestrieri (crossbowers) group who died.

Giorgio, who lives in the countryside, said, *I hope that everything will go back to the way it was before, except that we will be more careful and the health care better organized and better financed. I would like my life to be as it was before. I want to return to my town, to visit my son and my friends.* Giorgio compared this period of time to the polio scare, which he remembered from the 1950s. That time was worse, he said, but now as then, we need to find a cure, a vaccine. Living in isolation with a partner is not bad, it's a totally new experience, and there is television, the computer, the garden, and home repairs. Giorgio's brother's friend, age 67, died from Covid after being exposed during his work just outside Lucca, in early April. For a while there was the fear that his brother might have been exposed too.

Tina, living in town, finds that people are very careful and will become even more so afterwards, worried about contagion, but kind to those who need help. There will be big changes, with fewer unnecessary purchases such as stylish clothing, but people will still want to have their vacations. Living in lockdown has been difficult because Tina and her husband have had plumbers in their home due to problems with old pipes. She goes out as little as possible, and her husband can't go to the gym or walk around town (which he should do for medical reasons). Tina feels disheartened and tired out. She is losing interest in reading and television. She hopes life will be more relaxed and less stressful in the future.

Karen, who also lives in town, said that life will change in terms of how people spend money. They will spend less on travel, luxury items, and restaurants. She and her husband don't feel alone or depressed because every day at 6 p.m. the neighbours come to their windows to sing and wave their Italian flags. What's more, she also has a daughter and son-in-law living nearby. Her projects are sorting photos, writing stories, studying Italian, and caring for the plants in the courtyard. Her husband has been drawing, and both are actively in contact with friends and relatives via Facebook and phone calls. They haven't been directly affected, but a friend's relative died, and they knew of a nun in Lucca who also died from the virus.

Finally, I spoke with Luciana, who lives in an apartment just outside town. She said that the fears and worries about leaving the home will remain, especially for the elderly. People may decide to wear masks for a long time. They will gradually return to walking on the walls. *I am used to it, she said, because I have lived alone for a long time, I do my regular things at home, but hope all will return to normal.* The young generally have all they need and more, she said, at least here in Lucca. She too knew of someone who had died, a medical doctor in his 60s from Capannori.

Reflecting upon these comments, I am surprised to learn how many know someone who has died. This fact in itself is bound to create anxiety. Less surprising is to hear that most people are able to live alone (or with their partners) without too much stress, though obviously 4 to 6 weeks is not a very long time. Having children at home would surely complicate the equation, as Helga pointed out. In Italy we hear of spousal abuse; fortunately my sample didn't reflect this at all, on the contrary. What's more, for pensioners over 60, employment issues are not a main issue. They are more concerned about catching the virus. My own experience has been to feel more compassion, because even if we are all in the same boat, we are by no means equally exposed or equipped for what is happening.

— by Norma Jean Bishop