

The 'Third Quarter'

Many of you would have seen in the media recently information about the Third Quarter phenomenon. This is something that affects many people in isolation and confinement for long periods of time. Below is an article from the ABC regarding this to help with dealing with this stage and to support our families further to understand where we are in the journey of COVID-19. Please take a read when you get a chance.

Article Source:

<https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/coronavirus-covid19-isolation-third-quarter-phenomenon-has-begun/12190270>

In studies of people isolated in submarines, space stations or polar bunkers, researchers have found there appears to be an inflection point where the frustration and hardship of being cooped up inside gets suddenly harder to bear.

According to the clinical psychologist who assesses the mental health of Australians in Antarctica, we're entering this phase now.

Dr Kimberley Norris, an authority on confinement and reintegration at University of Tasmania, told *Hack* that Australians have broadly been through two periods of isolation: an initial point where there was panic buying and confusion, and then a "honeymoon period" when it felt novel and different to stay at home.

"For a little while people were saying how they were loving working in pyjamas, and not having to battle morning traffic," she said.

That phase — which we can call the sourdough starter moment, or the time when we all downloaded Houseparty — is passing.

"People are now saying they're feeling really lonely," Dr Norris said.

We may now be entering the dreaded third quarter of hollow-eyed stares, odd fixations and brooding resentment. Time grows sludgy. The days blur into the nights, and the weekdays into the weekends. You've hidden the notifications from a recently downloaded exercise app and you're no longer telling people you'll learn Italian. You begin to suspect that your friends have their own Messenger group.

"We don't understand what's going on with us," cosmonaut Valentin Lebedev wrote during the third quarter of a 211-day mission aboard a space station.

"We silently walk by each other, feeling offended. We have to find some way to make things better." In the psychological study of extreme confinement and isolation, this is known as the 'third-quarter phenomenon'.

The discovery of the third-quarter

The phenomenon was first described in early 1980s studies that set out to determine how long humans could survive in space. They found that radiation or zero-gravity were arguably less of a problem than interpersonal conflict caused by isolation.

"Typically, mood and morale reach their [lowest point] somewhere between the one-half and two-thirds mark of the mission," one review found.

A 1985 book *Living Aloft: Human Requirements for Extended Spaceflight* identified three broad stages of reaction to prolonged isolation:

"These are a first stage of heightened anxiety, a second stage of settling down to routine marked by depression, and a third stage of anticipation marked by emotional outbursts, aggressiveness, and rowdy behavior."

In 2000, a study found that those stationed at Antarctic research stations reported significant increases in interpersonal tension during the third phase of their expedition, due to both loneliness and cliquiness. Other researchers found a decrease in mood occurring around the mid-point and third-phase of the stay in Antarctica.

Crucially, they found that this third stage depends on the *relative* passage of time — in a six-month mission it could happen at around the four-month mark, while in a one-year posting it might appear at the eight-month point.

What's important is what proportion of the mission has elapsed, and how much is still to go.

How does this relate to COVID?

"People who see the curve flattening think we've done it, we've beaten it," Dr Norris told *Hack*.

"That's the signal that it's not long now. That re-energises hope."

The fact that the daily number of new cases has steeply fallen from a peak a few weeks ago may give the impression we're past halfway.

Both infectious disease experts and the politicians responsible for the restrictions say we're not even close. The social distancing rules are likely to remain in force until at least September or October — modelling shows that allowing people to mix freely too soon would trigger a second-wave of infections.

The uncertain duration of COVID restrictions could stretch the 'third-quarter period' over many months. Rather than a set amount of time, it's a state of anticipation.

"In Antarctica we have what we call the 'A-factor' or Antarctica factor'," Dr Norris said.

"When the sea ice is too thick for a vessel to get through or the runway ice isn't thick enough to land, that's the A-factor.

Though there's no national dataset of arguments between friends, Dr Norris says that if it existed, it would be registering a big spike.

"When you drill down into these isolated and confined environments like space stations, submarines and Antarctica, interpersonal conflict is the number one reason for dissatisfaction and unhappiness," she said.

"The frequency with which it occurs increases the longer you've been isolated."

Some good news

There's already [a lot of advice out there](#) on getting through COVID. It includes creating structure in your day and staying social online.

These tips are important, as is appreciating that some dip in mood is inevitable.

Isolation affects people in profound ways, and how we respond to the COVID restrictions is partly out of our control.

Even fearless astronauts and polar explorers get knocked sideways simply by not having people around.

Take it easy on yourself, Dr Norris says. The next few months may be hard.

"All things that would energise people and assist them to function effectively have been taken away so this is a genuinely hard thing to go through.

But there's also some good news.

Despite the third-quarter phenomenon and other ill-effects, many people who experience isolation once want to do it a second time.

About half of those who overwinter in Antarctica want to go back, Dr Norris says, as well as nearly 100 per cent of astronauts.

"We ask them, 'If it's so bad why do you keep going back?'"

Through her work, she's found that those who have been through a period of isolation value the experience for what it has taught: They have a better idea of their personal values, and they're more committed to acting on them.

"When people have space to sit back and think it allows them to figure out what's important to them," she said.

"That's why post-COVID we will see differences in the way people engage with each other, in the way people work, in the priorities given to the environment, and the way people think about travel."

She's found that, following experiences in isolated environments, men are more likely to use social support as a coping strategy compared to before they went in, while women have an increased trust in their own abilities.

That is, men become less insular and women become more confident.

"A lot of people expect spirituality to increase," Dr Norris added.

"All our data to date indicates it does not - at least not in Western societies. Instead, people have better personal relationships."

Should you be experiencing difficulties during this time, some key contacts are listed below:

Contact/Service	Call/Contact
Emergency (Police / Fire / Ambulance)	000
Lifeline (Crisis Support)	13 11 14
Beyond Blue (Counselling and Support)	1300 22 4636
Kids Helpline (Support for children and young people aged 5-25)	1800 55 1800
Child and Family Services (Connecting families to resources and support)	5337 3333
The Orange Door (Support for Family Violence)	Visit https://orangedoor.vic.gov.au
Safe Steps (Support for women and children who are victims of family violence)	1800 015 188
MensLine Australia (Counselling service for men with family and/or relationship issues)	1300 78 99 78
Child Protection (For children and young people whose safety is at risk)	13 12 78

Additionally, BeyondBlue have a terrific mental health campaign with support resources available at:

https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/?utm_campaign=hp_banner