

THE NEW NORMAL

Dr Pat Bonello

Lecturer

Department of Social Policy and Social Work

Everybody who is anybody is saying that, as a result of the pandemic, we now have to accept this 'new' normal we are living. Some present it as a good thing, while others see it as a sort of compromise that we need to either accept happily or rebel against. Making a sudden, unannounced arrival and creating havoc in its wake, the new normal has become the new kid on the block and, from what we keep hearing, seems to be here to stay. Reluctance to accept it is, somehow, even if subtly, labelled as resistance to change. But what is it that we are being asked to accept? And what, of the 'old' normal, should we be happy to discard? What kind of community, if any, is this new normal going to create?

This new normal has created an emphasis on technology as a means of maintaining contact; an insistence on physical distancing; a total cancellation of events where people are gathered together – be they celebrations, school, sports, religion, culture, dining out or simply family gatherings; a complete ban on travel outside the country; a focus on home as a safe haven; a situation of unemployment or threatened unemployment for many; and an assessment of outings as essential for them to be pursued. From where I am standing, or, perhaps, sitting on the sofa would better describe it, this list seems to be prohibiting many of the things which give many people pleasure and emphasising, besides some positive things, other negative aspects of life, leaving me to wonder what accepting the new normal would look like. The notion of house-arrest comes to mind and, if this were something to be advocated, why is it used as a punishment for crime? Why don't we encourage house-arrest as something which could enhance your quality of life, if it is so positive? And where does your connection to the community come from if you are under house arrest? Can the technological connection substitute the physical one?

The fact that this new normal comes with its warning about trying to maintain mental health is a bit of a give-away that it might not be so positive, after all. The guidance about how to make this period productive, fruitful, creative; how to maintain our sanity; how to strengthen our relationships; how to care for ourselves; how to catch up on things we haven't had time to do before; how to keep our kids occupied; creates pressure in its own right. We find ourselves being told that, in order to live this new normal well, we have to, for example, have a good laugh every day. What happens if it's time to go to bed and you haven't laughed? Do your chances of remaining sane nose-dive? Does getting somebody to tickle you count? If you laughed because you watched a good film, can you count this both as doing something you enjoy and having a good laugh, or do you have to tick the other box with something else? The recommendations have reached ridiculous proportions, adding another surreal level to this new normal and creating a complex when this level is not met.

While living in this new normal, we are being told that we cannot go back to the way things were, to the 'old' normal. And the underlying implication when this is stated is often, "thank goodness". This makes me reflect on what it is which we left behind which we would want to get rid of. Being able to hug people who are dear to us? Praying as part of a community? Having face-to-face meetings? Going out when and where we want to? Attending a concert or a football match? Going to the theatre? Travelling abroad? Eating out? Going to school? The list of things we have left behind goes on. Whether we would want to get rid of them is debatable to some, but clear to me. These are aspects of life which many of us are missing and which contribute to our feeling of community. At the same time, the life we were living was having an impact on our environment, on our

societies, on our communities. Without these activities, the world seems to be having a breather, seems to be coming to life again. So, is it a case of its either us or the world? Are we not allowed to carry forward any of our old normal into this new normal? Is there any way that we and the world can come to an existence which is mutually acceptable? Can we co-exist as a community?

If we had to look at the way many of us were living our lives prior to the pandemic, the description “frenzied abnormality” would perhaps fit better than “old normal”. And it is this frenzied abnormality that we cannot go back to. Nor do we want to, I would say. And, as I say that, I hear the world breathing a sigh of relief! At the same time, while adjusting to this new normal, which lacks many of the pleasurable aspects of our old normal, we are inheriting some features of the frenzied abnormality which we would like to leave behind. We find ourselves assessing our fulfilment according to our productivity, substituting schools with home-schooling, putting pressure on ourselves to cope, keeping ourselves well-informed or, in other words, being bombarded with things we should be doing. This is the “old normal” that results from frenzied abnormality, that many of us do not want to go back to, surely.

It seems to me that we are at a crossroad – one which we may be unable to leave for a while. However, being forced to stay at the crossroad gives us a chance to reflect on what path we would like to take, accepting the fact that people choose their own paths which may be different from ours. Rather than view the future as the “new normal”, the “old normal” or the “frenzied abnormality”, I would prefer to look at it as an “enhanced normal” which the pandemic has given me a chance to reflect on. I wish to be able to take forward with me aspects of my life which I have worked hard for and which have contributed to my identity; my relationships with family and friends; my enjoyment of particular events; my spirituality; my freedom; my autonomy and my ability to be close to people without fearing them. I wish to leave behind the social injustices created by a way of living which prioritises profit over humanity; the hectic culture of achievement; excessive ambition; the structural inequalities created by consumerist societies; and all the other negative aspects which were, in fact, preventing us from living a normal life in which everybody thrives, including the world. In other words, I wish to live in a community where everyone is welcome and where we all contribute to a better quality of life for all.

I, possibly like many other people, do not want to be told that I have to adjust to the new normal. I want my normality to integrate my past, my present and my future. I am prepared to abide by the instructions of the health authorities to the letter in the hope and conviction that this will lead to overcoming our current situation. In this way, I anticipate that I can, to a certain extent, gain some control over my future and make it resemble a normality that I am prepared, and would like, to live in. A normality which respects the environment and encompasses the common good, allowing the mantra “we’re in this together”, the mainstay of community engagement, to be one of the things which is carried forward into the future.