

# The new ways of living

Working from home, families eating together and communities supporting one another – these are a few of the new behaviours we’ve adopted in recent months. Some have been so popular that experts believe they will lead to long-term changes, as Mel Hunter reports



## We’ve moved much of life online

Technology has become a positive force, helping us to stay connected to one another in so many ways.

**H**ands up if you’d heard of Zoom back in January? There’s unlikely to be a forest of arms waving in the air. Yet, a few weeks into lockdown, many of us were using it as if it had been in our lives for many years. Made for business meetings, it’s proved far more fun for hosting lockdown quiz nights, birthday parties for kids, and sharing a virtual cup of tea with self-isolating loved ones.

Opening the door to these online meet-ups is just one way that, almost overnight, our society leapfrogged the fear, lack of confidence and plain disinterest in tech that may have stopped some of us embracing it before. Instead, left with little choice, we just got on with it.

‘People have almost been forced to try something they might have been nervous about trying previously,’ says Professor Kerensa Jennings, BT’s group director of digital impact. ‘They have discovered different ways of doing and learning things.’

So much of what we once did offline has now been achievable through our devices. Online grocery sales have, unsurprisingly, soared, and one in seven Brits have newly subscribed to a video streaming service.

Online yoga guru Adriene Mishler, with more than 7m subscribers, has been billed the ‘patron saint of lockdown’, while Joe Wicks became the nation’s PE teacher. The Zoom app was downloaded 2.13m times around the world on 23 March, the day UK lockdown was announced, and downloads of mental health apps also jumped almost a third as the crisis took hold.

‘We are lucky when it comes to online access,’ says Professor Jennings. ‘Even five years ago, a lot of the tech allowing the world to carry on may not have existed or been anywhere near as good. It has helped people stay together and feel a sense of belonging. The interesting part is that tech is not the thing they are learning. Rather, tech is the enabler that allows these experiences to happen. The more confident people are about using technology, the more they’re able to do in their lives. Tech is the wrapper. Everything else is what makes us human.’

\*\*YOUNG V POLL FOR THE FOOD FARMING AND COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION



Thanks to the lockdown, many have been trying out new tech

Only 9% of people want to go back to the way we lived before lockdown\*

Indeed, one of the main motivators for adopting new technology has been keeping in touch with those we love. While we may use these apps and services less as the restrictions are loosened, there is little doubt that some of these arrivals are here to stay.

‘We have been hearing magical stories of people having their first video call,’ says Professor Jennings. ‘And, although it had never entered my head before to have online drinks with a friend living abroad, that now makes a lot of sense. While we are craving human contact, that will undoubtedly resume and be appreciated more than ever. But those online connections will also endure long after life has returned to normal.’

## WE’VE CHANGED HOW WE BANK

Kalpna Fitzpatrick, *Good Housekeeping’s* finance editor.

The pandemic has supercharged the adoption of digital banking, with 70% of people now using online services, and around half using bank apps to manage their money.

With bank branches either shut or providing limited services, people had little choice but to bank digitally, and that is likely to continue.

More than a third of UK bank branches have closed in the past five years and more could follow, according to fintech firm Nuco. It

predicts a 24% drop in the number of people avoiding going into banks and using digital services instead.

But Adrian Buckle, head of research at UK Finance, which represents the finance and payments industry, says we will not move to purely digital banking: ‘There will always be services that some people prefer to do in person, such as mortgage applications, and some don’t feel comfortable banking online. I don’t think

that all banks will go all-digital; telephone and online banking will complement branch services.’

Whether you embrace digital banking or not, we will rely less on cash as many of us avoid touching it to avoid the spread of infection, and retailers continue to encourage shoppers to use contactless cards.

Less than a quarter of payments in the UK are now made using cash, compared with 60% of all payments in 2008.

## We've adopted a different work/life balance

With millions of people now used to working from home, what does it mean for the future of the office?

**A**round half of the UK's working population has been working from home since the end of March, and in many cases quite happily, navigating adeptly between work and home life.

Thanks to tech solutions and Zoom calls making face-to-face meetings unnecessary, the world of work has been transformed. The question now is: what happens next?

Some business experts believe that we won't return to our office-based way of working and flexible working is here to stay.

Professor Sir Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology at Manchester Business School, says employers and employees benefit. 'Working flexibly works,' says Professor Cooper. 'People are more satisfied, more productive and there is less absenteeism. Employers will like the fact that they can get rid of a lot of expensive office space, crunching three floors down to one.'

Certainly, UK employees are expecting long-term change. Half of those surveyed by O2 for its Flexible Future of Work report think they will be spending less

## 81% of people surveyed expect to be able to work at least one day a week from home after lockdown

More people have discovered the joys of flexible working



time in an office. A third expect to work at least three days a week more from home, and 81% expect to work at least one day a week from home.

So will companies actually need offices any more? Twitter is one company that has already told its staff they can continue to work at home 'for ever' if they so wish.

Professor Cooper sees offices becoming more of a hub to pop into, perhaps sharing space with other companies. Workers will come in to get their social fix and water-cooler catch-ups, but most will not do so every day. 'It is no longer going to be a case of getting on the train or in the car at 7.30am to commute to an office and then doing a long day at your desk,' he says. 'People will work flexibly, partly from home and partly from a central office.'

Annie Auerbach, author of *Flex: The Modern Woman's Handbook*, has long been a supporter of flexible working, and says it's now difficult for firms to argue against it. 'Companies that had long insisted flexible working wouldn't work were scrambling to make it a reality,' she says. 'The barriers melted away. Something that flexible-working pioneers have been pushing for suddenly tipped over into the mainstream, and now it will be hard to go back.'

'There will still be a place for a workplace,' says Annie, 'but its function will change, incorporating more of a blend of home and office working. We'll likely see people coming in for core hours. Rather than sitting alone at their work stations, they'll spend that time together, talking, collaborating and exchanging ideas.'

Christine Armstrong, a writer and researcher of work trends, says that people have very different ideas of what they want to happen next. 'One report shows that 22% of Londoners never want to work from home again,' she explains. 'Meanwhile, another study shows 24% of people never want to go back to their place of work. So you have this real tension between these two groups and I think it's going to be difficult to reconcile that.'

One issue for employers is the fact that if people are choosing to just 'pop' into the office for meetings, it is likely that they will want to do so at the same time, and that will be hard to manage while adhering to social distancing.

While Christine expects to see offices start to open by the autumn, she believes it will take a year or two for them to get back to a settled pattern.



The challenge is not to let community spirit slip away

## We've nurtured community spirit

A new sense of togetherness has bonded us, and that's something many want to keep going.

**S**mall acts of kindness have shone through the dark days of the past months, with communities coming together to support one another through the crisis.

Ironically, at a time when we have had to be mindful of getting physically close to people, new friendships and connections have been forged. A study for John Lewis & Partners found half the people asked now waved at others in the street, while 21% were part of a street messaging or WhatsApp group to keep in touch with one another.

'Focus has shifted from the individual to the collective, kicking off a renewed communal spirit that will persist long after lockdown,' says Gabrielle Lieberman, a director of trends and social media research for market research company Mintel. 'The importance of human connection will be stronger than ever, and we will continue to see a strengthening of community.'

Lockdown certainly brought out the best in people. According to the Office of National Statistics, almost a third of us helped someone locally, and more than half said they felt a sense of belonging to their community. It is in stark contrast to six months earlier when four in 10 people admitted they didn't even know their neighbours' names.

Psychologist Vanessa King, author of *10 Keys To Happier Living* and lead expert for Action for Happiness, is heartened by this shift. 'We were ready to receive the kindness that came with the crisis. It almost gave us

permission to connect with others and brought us back to the best of what makes us human – being socially minded and kind. Helping people is a social glue; it is not just good for the beneficiary, it also has a boosting effect on the brain of the giver.'

One of Vanessa's lockdown highlights was families in her road gathering at a social distance outside the house of an 87-year-old to eat cake and sing *Happy Birthday*. 'She put a note through my door the next day saying it was the best birthday she'd ever had,' recalls Vanessa. 'It hardly took anything, but it meant so much to her and brought joy to the street.'

'The challenge now is to not let this community spirit slip away,' says Vanessa. 'We've sown the seeds. We just need to make a conscious effort to carry on nurturing them and they will continue to grow. Tiny things such as asking for help, sharing knowledge and checking in with the elderly and the isolated will keep it going. People have been experiencing this time very differently, and afterwards it will be the same. Some will be going back to work, while others will be unable to, and many will be grieving. Help and kindness will nurture connections. I see it as a massive opportunity. Community is for life, not just for crisis.'

Helen Goulden, chief executive of The Young Foundation, a charity that has launched a UK-wide programme to understand the impact of Covid-19 on communities, agrees: 'Any acts of kindness, altruism and generosity should be celebrated, and there has been a huge surge in people wanting to help each other. Those local connections that have been forged will continue; you can't "unknow" your neighbour.' But she adds a note of caution: 'Will people be as willing to help others when everyone is experiencing a downturn?'

**'I see this as a massive opportunity. Community is for life, not just for crisis,' says psychologist Vanessa King**

### We've connected round the table

Our eating habits have changed dramatically, and some of these trends look set to continue.

Since the lockdown first started, nine in 10 of us has changed the way we eat, according to research by environmental charity Hubbub, nearly half of us have started cooking more, and a similar number have been enjoying spending more time eating with family or those we live with.

With restaurants closed, the kitchen has become more central than ever to our way of living. The thrice-daily ritual of mealtimes has provided much-needed structure, and the process of cooking and baking has provided a creative and calming outlet for many.

'We've reconnected through a shared love of food, which is wonderful to see,' says Martyn Lee, executive chef at Waitrose & Partners. 'We have really valued the time we spend with families, and special moments around the dinner table have become more important. Now we've ignited that spark, it is naturally going to continue.'

More than half (57%) of those surveyed by Hubbub said they began valuing food more during lockdown.

It's a time of experimentation, says Martyn. 'People are looking into their cupboards and wondering what they can do with the things they have in there. They are getting more creative at using what they have. As well as cooking comfort food, many are looking at more experimental cuisines, especially Thai,

**Mealtimes have become a central part of family life again**



### Over half of those surveyed said they began valuing food more than before the restrictions were imposed

Chinese and Japanese. If they can't go to restaurants for excitement and inspiration, they are trying to get it at home. While they'll want to support restaurants when they open, they will also continue to create that experience at home.'

Not only have we been digging deep for inspiration, we've also got better at planning more and wasting less. In the Hubbub survey, almost half of people say they are trying to throw away less food and, of those wasting less, half are planning more carefully and four in 10 are getting better at using leftovers.

'The way that people are navigating their storecupboards and peering into their freezers for inspiration is one of the great positives to come out of this,' says Martyn.

GH's cookery director, Meike Beck, agrees. 'I imagine that, going forward, weekly meal planning will become more popular, helping with food costs, minimising waste and managing stress,' she says. 'We've also got smarter about food waste, scrubbing up on use-by and best-before dates and making their storecupboards work harder.'

'Baking has been a big comfort during the long days of lockdown, requiring calm and concentration while allowing us to create something special for those we love,' she adds.

The ritual of eating together may be a lasting legacy from lockdown, more possible now with people working from home than when long working hours and packed diaries pushed families apart. A fifth of us are sitting at the table for meals together, according to research by John Lewis & Partners, with more than a third spending longer cooking meals than usual.

'Before, we were so time poor, but now people will want to hold on to the joy of eating together,' says Martyn.

People are also shopping differently, with a third saying in the Hubbub survey that they are supporting more smaller, local businesses than before. Nine in 10 say they'll continue to do so once the restrictions are over.

But amid all the positive shifts towards more mindful eating and shopping, there are some notes of caution. Trewin Restorick, CEO of Hubbub, said: 'Our polling reveals a divided nation. Some families are eating together more, young people are learning to cook, people want to know more about growing food and are planning meals better and using up leftovers. More people are shopping locally. But what is of concern is that just under half are more worried about food than previously and 43% are concerned about the cost of food.' □