

## ***Finding the positive in the pandemic***

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Annabel crossed the threshold, knowing there would be no human contact for a long two weeks. Putting down her suitcase, she looked out the window at the view stretching above the buildings of the inner west of Sydney, with the hazy Blue Mountains in the far distance. Her loved ones were only three hours' drive beyond the mountains, so much closer than where she had just been.

The saga had started two months before, when she received the dreaded phone call from her home country that her mother had cancer. Annabel had pleaded with Border Force to be allowed to travel to England to see her mother. The first application was rejected, which was a huge emotional setback. She had moved to Australia to work as a doctor almost two decades earlier, yet at this moment, she didn't have the freedom to leave. After several phone calls and an anxious wait, approval was finally granted. Her mother had been diagnosed with lymphoma in early 2021, and had been hospitalised with pneumonia twice in the preceding two months. It was a race to get there in time.

She was still in hospital when Annabel boarded the almost empty Airbus, and the 24-hour flight ahead seemed like it would last an eternity. Annabel had lost her father at the height of the pandemic in 2020, and the thought of losing her mother as well, so soon after, was too much to bear. After a long flight, Annabel was met by her brother at Heathrow Airport, with whom she proceeded to debrief about the events of the last twelve months on the long drive home. She intended on setting a few things up for her mother's impending return home, but fell asleep at 6pm, unable to stay awake any longer.

Unbeknown to Annabel, her mother had self-discharged from hospital at 9pm that evening, and a long-awaited and emotional reunion occurred at the breakfast table the following morning. Overall, the trip was a great success, with in-home rehabilitation by Annabel for the next four weeks. She left a freezer filled with home-made meals, and a much more energetic and capable mother in her own home. Home was beckoning too for Annabel, but a mandatory two-week quarantine awaited her on arrival back Down Under.

So what was Annabel to do with her time in hotel quarantine? Walks around the hotel room, morning yoga sessions and live-streamed Pilates classes helped to pass the time. She played her violin and even managed a few lessons with her teacher via Zoom. Of course, she had daily video calls with her family, and finally found time to catch up on all the Netflix series she had previously been too busy to watch. She thoroughly enjoyed the mindset themes shared in the Ted Lasso series, the soccer coach who impacts the players by building belief in themselves. But work? In this situation and environment? Opening Pandora's box by being available to private patients in this once-in-a-lifetime period? Telehealth had been easier to do since the pandemic and lockdowns. She had time on her hands and knew her

patient waiting list was building up whilst overseas. It was time to be decisive and intentional. This was two weeks in her adopted country without the usual family, home and work routine, but not exactly a holiday either. At times it even felt like a retreat, minus the woodland walks and sharing stories by candlelight.

With this space to reflect without any dependants under the same roof, she gained an awareness of what was no longer a low-stress part of her career, rather a source of high stress. It was impacting her self-esteem, her satisfaction with work and her connection with family. That source was her private clinical practice. At times she thought she was less efficient than she had been. Sometimes she could not answer all the queries patients brought to their consults and was disappointed in herself. She always had high expectations of herself, and this translated into every aspect of her life. Wondering if she really made a difference to those who chose to consult with her, she became cynical about her work. She had never mentioned this to anyone, not even her husband. Keeping her cards close to her chest, she hid her emotions under the carpet so she wouldn't really feel nor show them. Her kids may have picked up on some changes, or maybe the way she was might have been all they had ever known in their mum. Was this what burnout looked like?

Brown paper bags with repetitive food offerings were dropped at her door three times a day. She had been instructed to wait ten seconds before opening the door to allow the delivery person to walk away. The few times she did see a human, in full protective clothing, were for COVID swabs done on Days 2 and 10. Hardly the time to look forward to being within two metres of another human. Friends dropped food parcels at the front door of the hotel. These fresh home-made offerings were so gratefully received with a sense of support from outside.

This space and time, she realised, was an opportunity to process how she had been on auto-pilot for the past five years. The option of quitting had never occurred to her. It just wasn't the thing to do in a career where you had invested years of time, given up nights of sleep and paid a significant amount of money for training, and your identity was your work. Annabel had learnt the facts at medical school that were required of her in hospital. She had not been prepared for the emotional rollercoaster of being a doctor, both the positive and negative feelings that were inevitable in her career. What was she to do with what was hidden behind the professional persona? This question gnawed away at her.

After a few days Annabel recovered from the jet lag and, along the way, came to realise that this was a fundamental moment in time for her, both personally and professionally. She would continue her public hospital work part-time, but she decided to cease her private practice by the end of the year. Although others might be disappointed in her, including family, colleagues and patients, this was her life and career, and the decision was hers and hers alone. She could not control how others felt about it.

The previous year, Annabel had enrolled in a coaching program through a physician-coach based in the USA. She had a weekly 15-minute one-on-one session with a coach, and started to become aware of how her feelings drove the decisions she made. Talking about thoughts and feelings was a new concept which she hadn't been exposed to in her medical training, at least not on a personal level. One of the biggest changes was from self-

judgement to self-compassion. It was not easy, but thoughts of self-deprecation eventually transformed to thoughts of kindness and acceptance. Annabel increased her understanding and naming of her range of feelings, realising that life was not all happy, joyful moments. Negative feelings like discomfort, courage and fear were normal human emotions. It was not wrong to feel these emotions, and they could be helpful in moving forward.

During the fortnight in hotel quarantine, Annabel continued to receive coaching sessions via Zoom. It was a safe space to express what was going on to a non-judgemental, non-opinionated coach, who reflected back her thoughts, and helped her to see any blind spots that she might be unaware of. It was a different connection and conversation from that with a good friend, relative or her partner, who always felt the need to proffer their opinion and advice.

After almost a year of being coached by inspiring and experienced physician-coaches, with results beyond those she had expected, Annabel decided to invest in coach certification herself. She was always curious about how things worked, and the tools used in coaching intrigued her. As a client, she was not fully privy to the methodology. The coaching certification was delivered virtually, and she met a range of peers, also in health care, from around the world. It was intense, with live assessments via Zoom in front of peers and her mentor. One main difference between medical training and coach training was that failure was encouraged! Trying out new things before one felt ready was normalised. It was a safe, refreshing space where she felt welcomed without expectation or judgement.

Once she completed certification, she was clear in her next steps. Rather than just using this new skill set for herself, she knew she wanted to share the tools with others as a coach for healthcare professionals. Athletes and executives had coaches, but coaching for doctors was not yet commonplace.

The clients she coached were often overwhelmed, needing something to change to relieve them of this feeling – a familiar feeling that would wake them in the night, and greet them with their alarm clock. They judged themselves harshly, and related to achieving goals through pain and strife. They had high expectations of themselves, just like Annabel, and hadn't yet considered an alternative. Imposter syndrome reared its ugly head time and time again.

They expressed relief at learning about the human brain in a different practical way from all the anatomy, neurology and psychiatry lectures they had received – that we are wired to be cautious, seek pleasure and minimise energy expenditure if at all possible. Any easy source of a dopamine hit was exactly what the primitive brain was searching for! And yet the prefrontal lobes were the source of higher thinking and allies in managing our minds. By anticipating what might go wrong, what might be an obstacle along the way, and making a plan for it, we could stay one step ahead of our primal urges.

For Annabel, there was the satisfaction of stepping outside the norms of her profession and adding a new string to her bow. She maintained her clinical practice in a public hospital and now offered fellow physicians a place to grow into more confident, energised and satisfied versions of themselves.

The pivotal event in Annabel's life had been the fortnight in hotel quarantine. This was a turning point where she paused and reflected, and decided to do something different. She believed that by coaching healthcare professionals, she connected with them as a peer-facilitator. They created change in their own lives in a way that she had never felt able to do as a doctor treating patients. The impact on Annabel was playing a vital part in the wellbeing of healthcare professionals.