

# COVID STORIES:

Personal insights from the pandemic years



1 February 2023

## **About VCOSS**

VCOSS is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector, and the state's premier social advocacy body.

We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where every person and community is supported to thrive. We work relentlessly to prioritise wellbeing and inclusive growth to create prosperity for all.

We achieve these goals through policy development, public and private advocacy, supporting and increasing the capabilities of the state's social service bodies, forging strong coalitions for change, and explaining the true causes and effects of disadvantage.

VCOSS's strength comes from its members and the people they serve. Our members include frontline service groups, peak bodies, advocacy organisations and individuals passionate about a fair, sustainable and inclusive Victoria.

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VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. Our office is located on the sovereign, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.

## **Lived experience statement**

VCOSS thanks all those who shared with us their personal stories, experiences and insights in the development of this work. Every person is shaped by their history and environment. Many people have endured trauma or hardship. For some, this trauma and its effects continue today. When somebody shares their experiences and insights with VCOSS, they enrich both our understanding of the issues and our recommendations for change. Thank you for your courage and generosity.

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over.

As I write this, in early 2023, record-breaking numbers of Victorians and people across Australia continue to be affected by the virus, sometimes in long-term and devastating ways.

Nevertheless, as a discrete period characterised by broad-based public health restrictions and unprecedented health, economic and social flow-ons, the ‘peak’ pandemic years of 2020 and 21 are, for better and for worse, behind us.

For many Victorians, the specific pain points of those years are still felt as fresh wounds.

For others, there were things gained – a respite from poverty in the form of temporarily increased government benefits, improved workplace flexibility, or the social cohesion that came from neighbours stepping up to help each other out – that we should not forget or leave behind.

As the peak body of Victoria’s community sector, one of VCOSS’s missions is to platform the stories of people who are marginalised or disadvantaged, whose voices are not often heard. Accordingly, during 2020 and 2021 VCOSS ‘gave the microphone’ to Victorians in many different positions.

This included people in front-line industries unable to work from home and isolate. It included people for whom isolation was the overriding and overwhelming experience of the pandemic. It included those caught up in the most extreme of the Government’s pandemic measures, such as the ‘hard lockdowns’ of public housing towers, and those for whom the pandemic was marked by escalating racism, ableism and other forms of exclusion.

This publication brings together stories – in the form of first-person articles and interviews – that we heard and told during those strange, difficult days and months.

Some of the pieces were published as part of VCOSS's *My Corona* series: personal stories about the pandemic. Others were produced in partnership with Vic Health, as part of the *Good health in the time of COVID* project.

These stories are a valuable record and a resource for the future. Wherever you are in the 'COVID recovery' journey, we hope you find something to relate to in them.



**Emma King**  
VCOSS CEO

## My Reason, My Sanity



Veronica Heritage-Gorrie

UNLIKE in the rest of world and indeed the rest of so-called Australia, when Covid-19 first entered our Sovereignty-unceded shores life as we once knew it changed, but not really for First Nation people.

But that is not the story I want to tell.

I want to tell you that while most people, excluding essential workers, were self-isolating and staying home as per restrictions handed down by the government, I was not able to. I had to leave the safety of my tiny rural township and my home to go stay in Melbourne for six weeks for my father's cancer treatment. I was essentially risking my life to save my father's.

My father who is a respected Elder and has dementia had been diagnosed with cancer, nasal cavity cancer to be more precise. He had surgery to remove most but not all the cancer and required radiation. Due to the location of the cancer, the regional hospital close to home was not able to treat it. This meant that we had to travel to Melbourne every Monday and return home every Friday after treatment for six weeks.

We stayed in accommodation provided by the hospital that is subsidised by the Government. This sounds good but it wasn't. We were staying in a place that was culturally unsafe, at a time when my pre-existing anxiety was heightened due to Coronavirus. We slept in a small room on single beds. This took me back to when I was a child and Dad and I lived in a one bedroom flat.

This place was only a short walk from the hospital, but my father was unable to walk that far so we drove, and when I couldn't find disability parking I double parked for an hour every day.

As much as I needed to assist my father to walk and find the location of his radiation, and as much as I wanted to go with him, I couldn't due to the restrictions – only patients were allowed. So I had to stay in the car and hope that he remembered where to go. More anxiety.

He would ring me when he got inside and ring again when he had finished. This was our routine.

But I had another routine that kept me somewhat sane.

Every day after treatment, I would drop my father off and drive to my daughter's house for a special window-visit. I knew it risked me getting fined by police but I didn't care.

My daughter, months earlier, had bravely given birth to premature twins. The twins were in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit for a little over four months. Just as COVID-19 kicked off the twins were home with Mum and Dad.

These babies were my reason. The reason I needed to keep my shit together.

But my mental health was suffering. I wanted so badly to be with them, on the inside with them, but I couldn't.

So I would return to my father. I assisted him in every aspect of his day, but not before I had to literally run the gauntlet of supermarkets in infected hotspots to buy groceries for us, wearing facemask and gloves. This was when I panicked the most. In every aisle my heartbeat would race; I could feel it pulsating in my neck and throbbing in my ears.



Like many Australians, Ms Heritage-Gorrie was terrified about visiting supermarkets.

By the third week, my father started feeling the effects of radiation. Each day he was becoming frailer and losing weight at a rapid rate. It affected his physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

There were mornings my father and I would get up at 4am to have a cuppa and a yarn. We would talk until daylight and on some occasions he cried. To watch my father cry was the hardest. My father is my rock, the one person who has always been there for me.

You see, my father raised me on his own from when I was eight years old. I never wanted him to see me upset, so I would wait until I had a shower or when I was in my car alone to cry.

It's been a few weeks since the end of the cancer treatment and we are now awaiting an appointment date for him to be tested to verify if all the cancer has gone.

My father and I are in limbo and it's frightening. He is still feeling the effects of radiation: mobility loss, hair loss, nausea and mouth ulcers that require him to be on a soft food diet.

As the restrictions were slowly being lifted and people were leaving their homes I had only just started to self-isolate so I could go be with my daughter and the twins.



*Hooray*, I hear you say; but not so fast. I self-isolated and went to stay with my daughter as planned, for four days and three nights, but while I was there it meant I was not with my father and this caused me more stress and anxiety. I found myself calling him at every opportunity to check on him, but it became too much, it became over-bearing. I had to go home.

As I left the house I felt emotionally and mentally torn between staying with my only grandchildren or going home to my sick father. I cried all the way home, but when I got there he was so happy to see me and I felt like I had made the right decision. I won't have my father for long but what time I do have, I want to make it count.

My mental health is not the best right now. I have made an appointment to see my GP to do a mental health plan, so that I can get the professional help I need. I implore others who are having bad days or crappy moments to talk to someone too, because there is no shame or embarrassment in asking for help. 🖋️

**Veronica Heritage-Gorrie (Ronnie)** is a proud Kurnai woman and writer. An avid campaigner against family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody, Ronnie is passionate about pursuing justice for mob who were, and are still, affected by genocidal Stolen Generation. Veronica's debut memoir, *Black and Blue*, was published by Scribe Publications. It won both the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing and the Victorian Prize for Literature (Australia's richest literary award, with a \$100,000 prize) in 2022.

Veronica's story was published in June 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series, personal stories about the pandemic, life in isolation and Victorians' hopes and fears for the future.

## Living through touch in the age of Corona



Olivia Muscat

I think a lot of people would agree that lockdown is one of the strangest collective experiences they've ever been through. And while individuals may have been able to take some positives from being at home, I'm sure it isn't something that most people are eager to go through again.

As the restrictions are lifted and we're allowed (with caution and physical distancing) to see our friends and go out to eat, I find myself feeling very much still in the midst of it all. It will be a long time before I, and many other disabled people, feel that we can get out and live our lives as we did before Covid.

As keen as I am to get myself back into the world – slowly and carefully, of course – as a blind person it's much easier said than done. I find myself full of fear, having lost so much of my independence. Before lockdown my life consisted of something different nearly every day, often travelling on public transport, meeting new people, going to places I'd never been before.

That means I touch a lot of stuff. *A lot of stuff.* Sometimes I need to, like when I'm holding a stair rail for balance, when I'm at a café I've never been to before, when I'm looking for something. Sometimes I touch without thinking, to explore a cool texture on a wall or have a look at something interesting in a shop. Sometimes it's unintentional: I accidentally brush up against and put my hand on loads of things, and often those things are really gross – I've gotten up close and personal with more than my fair share of bins.

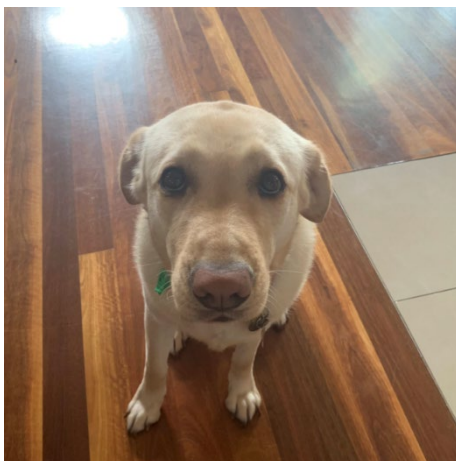
I also unintentionally come into contact with complete strangers all the time. When I'm reaching for something and they move in front of me at the wrong moment. Or, much more frustratingly, when people decide they absolutely must help me (interfere) without my consent and grab my arms or hands, because they are certain that I couldn't possibly have any idea where I'm going and I must be lost. This is not on at the best of times, and I don't see people refraining from doing it just because of a little thing like required physical distancing.



Many blind people or people with a vision impairment must touch public infrastructure to travel.

In my regular life I try not to be concerned about germs too much. I carry hand sanitiser and wipes with me basically everywhere I go and wash my hands when it makes sense. But it would be unfeasible to do so every time my hands come into contact with something foreign. For a blind person, being unable to deal with the thought of germs would be debilitating.

But the thought of getting Covid-19 or of putting somebody else at risk is not to be taken lightly. So I feel it will be a good long while before it's safe for me to be out in public by myself.



I also have a guide dog, who doesn't understand the requirements for physical distancing and the danger of germs (she would eat somebody's dirty tissue given half a chance). Between us I can't see when I'm too close to somebody and she doesn't know she has to keep at least 1.5 meters away from humans.

One of her favourite tricks when we're walking along a street or corridor is to walk us right through the middle of conversations, instead of around the group of people. While it isn't the most

professional guide dog thing she does, it used to give me a private giggle. Now the thought of it makes me very uncomfortable. And I can't prevent it as there's no way to know when something like that is going to happen.

Many people also forget their common sense around dogs. Even at the peak of isolation, when I was just walking her around the block, people would come up way too close to talk to me or try to bring their dogs to say hello. I was not, and am not, ok with that.

I really love being able to get out and do my own thing, but all of this means that I am very unlikely to go out alone, and I don't have people at my beck and call to guide me. Which means my lockdown is essentially ongoing, for a few months at least.

I am not alone in this situation. I know many disabled people whose lockdown is not ending any time soon, whether for reasons similar or different to my own. It is extremely frustrating and the uncertainty is scary. Life with a disability already takes so much forethought and planning, and this will make it even more laborious to do what we want and need to do.

So when non-disabled people feel their lives are pretty much back to normal and they're doing everything they missed during lockdown, disabled people will most likely still be living with a lot of restrictions. Not by choice, but by necessity.

Thankfully, one of the side effects of a worldwide lockdown is that many events have become available online. It is my greatest hope, as the world attempts to right itself, that non-disabled people don't forget about those of us who will remain at home much longer. And many of us would benefit from accessible online events not just in the short term, but forever.

Once people are able to have an audience or meet in the same room, I hope that event organisers continue to provide streaming or conference call options. We should take this positive thing that has come out of this terrible, stressful time and use it to make our world more accessible. There is still a long long way to go, but a lot of organisations now have truly no excuse for excluding disabled people and I want to see them take hold of that and use it as a step forward.

Like everyone, I've learned a lot about myself during isolation. I've also learned a lot about what a post-lockdown world should look like. For me and many others it's not as simple as cautiously going back to the way things were before. My life will involve even more thought and planning than ever, to allow me the level of independence I want and need. Only time will tell if the world is ready to make something good out of something awful, creating the accessible spaces and opportunities that disabled people have long been fighting for. 🖊️

**Olivia Muscat's writing about art and disability has appeared in *Witness Performance*, *Time Out* and *Baby-Teeth Journal*; among others. Her personal essays are featured in the anthologies *Meet Me at the Intersection* and *Growing Up Disabled in Australia*.**

She lives in Melbourne with her Guide Dog, Jemima, where she teaches drama and writing to kids and teenagers and is co-founder of 'The YA Page'.

Olivia's story was published in June 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.

## My COVID journey: from “Yellow Peril” to Bla(c)k Lives Matter



Angelita Biscotti

In the early days of COVID-19, when uncertainty was high, I had just emerged from a depressive episode triggered by racism in my daily life.

With COVID restrictions setting in and the public demanding a scapegoat, I started seeing headlines about a “Chinese virus”.

I had to stop reading the news to preserve my sanity – but the news seeped into my life. My feed was full of reports about vicious verbal and physical attacks against people who “looked Chinese” all over the world. Iconic Asian businesses were shutting down. I was terrified of accidentally sneezing on public transport even though I was healthy and practising social distancing. I saw white people sneezing and coughing liberally, not covering their faces. I knew they would never understand the fear and pressure I felt.

I live on a street that’s majority white. It was hard not to feel put on the spot when I saw “Yellow Peril” spray-painted on my local bus stop.

Experiences of racism, of feeling helpless and belittled, are triggers for my borderline personality disorder (BPD) symptoms.

BPD is a chronic mental health condition characterised by an unstable sense of self, an extreme fear of abandonment, rapidly changing and intense moods, and impulsivity. It has been likened to having no emotional skin, such that the slightest sense of loss, rejection, frustration, confusion, anger, grief, or shame feels like a third-degree burn.

Behaviour commonly associated with this condition can include suicide attempts or threats, drug and alcohol problems, gambling, excessive spending, explosive tantrums, and other impulsive behaviours. Not all BPD sufferers engage in all of these behaviours, and this isn’t necessarily how the condition manifests in my own life. Nevertheless, these and related behaviours may seem shocking and irrational to an outsider – until you consider that people with BPD are just trying to escape what feels like a house on fire.

It had taken a long time to get my BPD diagnosis, alongside diagnoses of generalised anxiety, depression and PTSD. It had taken my partner begging me to see a therapist – *another* therapist, as I

had tried many in the past, always with the same results: a few moments of hope followed by weeks of despair, defensiveness, feelings of betrayal and being misunderstood.

My new therapist Gaia (not her real name) was different. A beautiful, educated woman my age. We shared similar values. Her eyes were the colour of high-end chocolate. Her room smelled like cinnamon.

I started to feel safe. Safe enough to be present in, and accepting of, my imperfect self. I started to share pieces of me I'd never shared with therapists before. For the first time in my life, I felt ready to seek out a diagnosis.

BPD has a bad rap amongst health professionals and the public: a condition with a poor prognosis, patients regarded as hopeless causes. Media coverage has not helped, with a tendency to focus only on the most extreme cases, and only recently bothering to incorporate the perspectives of those who live with the condition every day.

Effective treatments have only emerged in the last 20 years. Much work has yet to be done to develop best practices for queer folks and people of colour, whose emotional triggers and vulnerabilities are different to normative research assumptions.

As the COVID situation continued, the triggers got worse. It was upsetting to read news about how international students were being hung out to dry, told to get out of the country and too bad if they couldn't afford it.

I'd been an international student once (on a full scholarship), and when I needed to fly to Manila after my dad died I couldn't qualify for an emergency plane ticket loan just because I was an international student, even though I could pay back the money in full with my next scholarship instalment 14 days later. An unplanned, unpredictable emergency like my dad's sudden death, like COVID-19, messes not only with your finances, but your mental health.

Losing sessional higher-education contracts dealt another blow to my well-being. One university honoured their contract and paid me to do the work I had committed to. The others just said, "Don't come in."

Being able to contribute financially is important for me, having survived financial abuse in the past. I'm fortunate that my partner still has his job and is 100% supportive of me. Still, the whole situation triggered emotional memories of being utterly dependent with no escape.

Then George Floyd was brutally murdered. There was the sudden and extreme increase in media attention on the ongoing historical injustice of police violence against black people everywhere and First Nations communities in Australia.

I saw how essential it was to do racial justice community-work and self-work every day – even in a small way, even in my own way. Anything done with an open heart and a willingness to grow and adapt to criticism was better than the quietism and apathy that had allowed so much suffering to go on unquestioned.

I almost didn't go to the Bla(c)k Lives Matter protest. I was emotionally spent and did not want to risk falling ill or having a panic attack in a crowd. But as I was getting my takeaway brekky in my mostly white inner suburb, I saw white people going about smiling, laughing, making plans, like their world had not changed.

Like [George Floyd](#), [Breonna Taylor](#), [Ahmaud Arbery](#), [Tanya Day](#), [David Dungay](#) and so many more had not been taken from their loved ones too soon, their lives lost to white supremacy and indifference.

The white dads with their prams ran their eyes up and down my body like my only value to the world was eye candy for wealthy men. I felt myself panic. The hot flashes. The ticking fingers. The clicking jaw. The boiling rage. The sensation in my belly that said, *"You're not safe here. You were never safe here."* I had to get away.

An hour later, I was standing outside Parliament House in a mask and gloves.

Around me were masked people of all ethnic backgrounds and genders, many of them my age.



There were many first-time protesters too. I was getting texts from white friends who had never been to a rally before but wanted to go. I saw social media notifications from people sharing racial justice posts even if they'd never been openly political before.

Thousands of masked faces on the street in the middle of a pandemic, thousands of voices chanting, "bla(c)k lives matter."

A moment overdue. Better now than never.

May it be a moment that leads to enduring transformation for our country's most vulnerable people. Aboriginal activists have led the march for years, and most of us are late to the front line.

One of my symptoms is to only feel in control when I'm dictating the terms of engagement.



That day, in the middle of a pandemic, I felt safe in my rightful place as a supporting act, a bricklayer and cheerleader in the grand design of a hopefully fairer future.



Angelita Biscotti is a queer Filipinx Melbourne artistic storyteller whose work has appeared in many respected Australian publications. She was a 2017 Hot Desk Fellow at the Wheeler Centre, and is a Fellow in the 2020 Create Change Fellowship, a project delivered in partnership with Democracy in Colour and cohealth.

Angelita's story was published in July 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.

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## It Doesn't Work Like That



Jinghua Qian

This is not your typical unemployment story. My experience is a little unusual. But maybe that's precisely the point: the COVID-19 response from both state and federal governments makes certain assumptions about how we work, and a lot of us just don't work that way.

I'm a writer. But often writing doesn't really pay, or rather, the type of writing that's worth *doing* tends to pay poorly, slowly, and irregularly, if at all.

Writing is both a vocation and a profession but it's often not a job in a recognisable way. You cobble together a living out of various odds and ends while trying to build a career, and if there happens to be overlap between your life's work and the things you get paid for, then you consider yourself lucky.

I've been lucky. Over the last decade, I've had jobs ranging from call centre operator to head of news at a well-regarded international media outlet. I've also drawn freelance income from writing, editing, public speaking, performing, radio and podcast making, producing events, transcribing, and proofreading. And I've done a lot of unpaid work in arts and activism, both for myself and for the world I want. I'm used to keeping lots of plates spinning.

Before the pandemic properly hit Australia, I was working at an online media outlet as a writer and editor on a fixed-term contract. I left that job in early March to become a full-time freelancer.

A week later, the country went into lockdown.

The arts sector (my main client) was totally devastated as theatres, galleries, cinemas and music venues closed.

Media outlets also started slashing their budgets and shedding staff.

I was terrified. I was supposed to be building my freelance business but instead it seemed like the entire industry was collapsing. Plus, maybe the world was ending. I kept seeing petitions calling for more government support for the arts, which I dutifully signed, but it felt like holding a placard in a tornado. I was reeling from shock and glued to the news, too struck with grief and uncertainty to apply for any of the grants or relief funds that started to pop up. I also didn't know how to answer the question of how much income I'd lost because I'd only just started.

But I was still writing, still pitching, still numbly hustling away. There were the weeks where everyone only wanted COVID-related content, and then suddenly everyone wanted to read about something else. I struggled to come up with ideas; almost everything seemed in poor taste for this crisis.

When I did get work, it was beset by all the predictable freelance problems: by mid-May, I was still waiting on payment for work completed in March. For some commissions, I spent more time chasing payment and wrangling paperwork than I'd spent doing (and being paid for) the work itself.

As a freelancer, I usually have few rights and no leverage to negotiate, though salaried staff aren't necessarily faring much better – a few of my articles are stuck in limbo because the companies are going through layoffs.

It seemed like I'd chosen a terrible time to leave my job, but there were also benefits to joining the teeming ranks of the unemployed during a global pandemic.

So many mutual aid groups sprang up. Newspapers that are ordinarily devoted to vilifying welfare recipients softened their stance.

The Federal Government doubled the payment that jobseekers receive.

On the one hand, it made me feel sick to see how politicians and media commentators divided up the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, but on the other, it showed me what a critical mass can achieve. What a testament to the power of the collective!

It only took a pandemic for people to see that social security is just as its name implies – an essential feature of a safe and healthy society.

Eventually, I managed to access unemployment benefits, which I probably wouldn't have been eligible for under the normal rules. It was still a frustrating process – no one would advise me on whether I was supposed to apply for JobSeeker or JobKeeper, and most of the available information didn't make sense for sole traders – but overall it seemed less punitive and humiliating than the usual Centrelink experience.

I was already a union member with the [Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance](#) – which suspended fees for members who requested it – and in March I also joined the [Australian Unemployed Workers' Union](#).

It feels like there's an opportunity now to turn some of the lessons of the pandemic into real change.

So much of the emergency response from state and federal governments seems to misunderstand the ongoing precarity that many of us are in.

Writers are far from the only ones for whom the pandemic just pours fuel onto the pre-existing problems of capitalism today, but the crisis has made it very obvious just how unsustainable the arts and media industries are, even as people consume more news, music, television and film than ever.

As Jacinda Woodhead – then editor of long-running literary journal *Overland* – [wrote last year](#), the Australia Council for the Arts funding system fosters a “disposable arts culture” focused on the new and shiny. As a result, artists are in a constant state of precarity and crisis.

That means that for many of us, there's nothing to return to, nothing to recover. The status quo is already broken. It's an empty bowl – with a smear of racism, sexism and ableism to boot.

In May, Naomi Riddle, editor of online arts platform *Running Dog*, [wrote](#):

“The arts community, then, continues on in a state of unending precarity. But a consequence of this tenuousness is a refusal to reckon with its decades-long reliance on government subsidies, philanthropic donations and corporate sponsorship. [...] Is it any wonder that when some of us hear the phrase ‘art sector’ combined with ‘unprecedented times’, we find ourselves without the capacity or the belief or the will or the desire to invest whole-heartedly in ‘saving’ it?”

It feels like a cliché at this point to say that a reckoning is long overdue, but it's true.

The way things were – it wasn't working.

I'm not sure I have anything cogent and concise to say about my hopes for the months ahead, because I can only whisper, naively, sheepishly: *What if we never go back?* 🖋️

[Jinghua Qian](#) is a writer, critic and commentator often found thinking about race, resistance, art, desire, queerness and the Chinese diaspora. Born in Shanghai, Jinghua now lives and works in Melbourne, on the land of the Kulin nations.

Jinghua's story was published in July 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.



[jinghuaqian.com](http://jinghuaqian.com)



[@qianjinghua](https://twitter.com/qianjinghua)

## Iso Drift



Christine Burrows

Winter solstice, June. Numbers are rising. From 19 new cases in Melbourne to 75 a week later. “We still have a state of emergency,” the Health Minister says.

You wouldn’t think so in Bendigo. Especially amongst the blokes: the bloke next door; the four blokes who installed my heater; the bloke at the plant nursery; the huddle of council blokes at the park having smoko.

“G’day”, “Beautiful day”, “Monster frost,” I offer, hauling my little black dog away.

I moved here 18 months ago for affordable housing. Didn’t know a soul. Fresh air. Big sky.

It’s been lonely. *COVID-19 makes it lonelier.*

When coronavirus became a thing, I hunted down facts, wary of complex rabbit holes of fake news, fake truth, and political spin. Already mired in chronic despair, I wryly imagined it might solve my existential quandary. “Come get me, Corona.”

Four years earlier an organ transplant saved my life. For the first two years, my gratitude and optimism were irrepressible. Gradually, debilitating complications, medication side-effects and the increasing isolation eroded my hope of regaining a useful, meaningful life. I’m alone. Perpetually exhausted. Often physically and cognitively overwhelmed by the simplest task. My mental health mimics my body’s tug-of-war with itself and the traumas that brand it.

January was bad. The country was on fire. I turned 60. A couple of texts; two bunches of delivered flowers wilting in scalding heat.

Depression had me in its claws and jaws. I bunkered down inside myself, avoiding communication; except with my son.

Mid-January I took my last train trip into Melbourne to see him. He grounds me. Lunch in Flinders Lane. Crowded. Noisy. Couldn’t hear. Couldn’t talk. Couldn’t think. Felt confused. An exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. Sensory overwhelm. Distress. I fought vertigo and a tight band of abdominal pain, determined to enjoy this time together. Couldn’t cope. Asleep on the train. Barely left bed for three days. But I felt happy.

Late February, my next/last trip to Melbourne, ahead of the 25<sup>th</sup> hospital procedure in four years to replace stents in my bile duct.

Another cherished meal and movie with my son for his birthday. As he entered his fifth and final year at uni he was contending with the sudden campus shut-down, poor online learning platform and inaccessibility of lecturers and key resources. His casual hospitality work and an internship vanished.

COVID-19 had landed. Xenophobes blamed Asian people for the virus. We were the only customers at the normally bustling Chinese restaurant; our small expression of support.

“I’m fine,” my son reassured me.

March. Shut-downs and restrictions hit people hard. Phone calls and messages ramped up. “Just calling to see how you are”. “Haven’t been in touch for a while. How’s life in Bendigo?” “Been thinking about you lately...”

Anxiety, clear and crisp. “Welcome to MY world!” I half-joked.

Iso, social distancing, hand hygiene, loss of income, loss of career, loss of freedom – all these things had been my world for five years. It was validating that others now experiencing them were struggling after only a few weeks. Perversely, it normalised my alienation and grief. Reduced the shame I felt for being an invalid.

I listened to distant friends and family. A small thing I could offer. Empathy. The stent change hadn’t given me the anticipated energy uplift. I felt less sick, but still fatigued, in pain and fog-brained. Talking exhausted me, but was all I had to give. Routine blood tests showed anaemia. An iron infusion was organised. It would revive me!

Autumn. The COVID-19 ‘crisis’ dominated conversations, news and social media. ‘Unprecedented’ entered common vocabulary, as did Epidemiologist and ‘pivot’. Doomsday preppers and panicked ‘everyday Australians’ lost their minds. The ‘toilet paper war of 2020’ spawned hilarious memes, but signified something darker. I often suffer prolonged diarrhoea related to medication or bile duct blockage so I too value a secure toilet paper supply. I was awkwardly over-supplied from a pre-Christmas Who Gives a Crap delivery! I wanted to give it to someone in need. Distressing footage of frail people getting pushed aside in supermarkets by frantic stockpilers, trollies spilling over with toilet paper and pasta, horrified me. As did busloads of grocery tourists clearing supermarket shelves in regional towns. Meanwhile my 97-year-old father in New Zealand had another ‘cardiac event’. I didn’t expect to see him again.

With snake season over, I started walking my dog in the bush around old mining mullock heaps nearby. Strange solace. No people. My dog ran, bounced and swam off-leash. I ambled, ruminated and took photos of eucalyptus flowers. There I disconnected from the troubled, bizarre world, free of its pain and madness, though not free from my own. The frosts started early.



As an old mining city, the countryside around Bendigo has many mullock heaps.

Sometimes I'm glad I'm alone, taking whatever time I need to do my small tasks without pretending bravery or the competence I've lost. Glad to have simple needs, despite complex medical issues. Glad of my toilet paper, sufficient pantry staples and veggies growing in my garden. Habits acquired to meet basic needs when I'm too unwell to leave the house. Telehealth is great. It saves four to six hours of stressful travelling to/from specialist appointments. The \$750 stimulus bought me a web-cam, a thick jumper, face masks, books, puzzles and a room heater.

Being immune-suppressed, most in-person interactions feel unsafe. People seem too close.

Except for my son. I want him closer. I worry for him. His carefully planned future disintegrated, blinked out like a mirage, just as it came within reach. Poised on his heel to pivot, he applies for every grad opportunity he can find. Generational disenfranchisement and exclusion of young people from decision-making concern him. I'm a disability pensioner; there's no wealth-buffer nor family or community networks to give him a break.

"I'm fine," he still reassures me.

I unreasonably expect myself to cope alone with way fewer coping resources than the younger, healthy, professional, socially-engaged, creative superwoman I used to be.

Pain is my normal. I notice its absence more than its presence. It sucks away optimism and resilience. Leaves a salty crust of cynicism and despair.

As COVID case numbers rise in Melbourne, whispers of a second wave are gov-splained as 'expected'.

"We're all in this together" goes the spin. But we're not. Differential disadvantage means low-income people suffer more, for longer. Many won't find a road back.

Winter solstice. The longest night. The wheel ever turning. With iron infusing my blood, I feel alive. It won't last. I write this while I can, as I drift further away.

Am I you? We? Us? Them/they? Dynamic, creative, compassionate, brave? Or sleepless and afraid?  
We've got this! *Have we?*

I'll stay in iso. Me and my little black dog. 🐶

Christine Burrows, originally from New Zealand (Aotearoa), lives in Bendigo on Dja Dja Wurrung country with her dog. She worked in population and community health before her own health collapsed. Also a poet, Christine's work explores trauma, grief, dislocation, social justice and queer experience. She has been published in many anthologies and literary journals/mags and performs regularly.

Christine's story was published in July 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.



## The day they locked down my home



Andrew Carman\*

The first I knew about it was 4:30pm on Saturday. I got a phone call from a friend wanting to know where I was.

“At home,” I said.

“Do you know you’re in hard lockdown?” he replied.

So I went downstairs and there were coppers everywhere, looked like Critical Incident Response police. I realised, *hang on, this doesn’t look good.*

I wanted to get my laptop out of my car and a copper threatened me with a fine. In the end he relented, but he followed me to the car and followed me back.

There was no degree of compassion. I mean, there’s no way I could have got into the car and driven away. It was blatantly obvious I had no personal belongings with me, just my keys. I just wanted to get my laptop.

I found out more on the news that night: *hard lockdown, you’re not going anywhere.* It was very confronting.

I had enough food to get me through for five days. I was probably going to be a bit dicey on vegetables, but I could have lived without them. But I was actually quite worried that it would be extended beyond the five days.

There was a total lack of communication, nobody seemed to know what was going on.

Not even the Salvation Army, who have an office downstairs, were allowed into the building. You couldn’t even go down into the foyer and speak to them while maintaining a social distance.

I’d been tested for COVID-19 the week before and had the negative result on my phone, which I showed the police. It had come through on the Thursday and I’d been home all day Friday. All I’d done is go to the supermarket on Saturday morning, wearing a face mask the whole time.

But there was this massive overreaction with coppers. It was contemptuous treatment, a total mistrust.

There was no food delivered until the Monday. I would say a lot of people use shopping as their daily exercise, so they would shop on a daily basis. I wonder how many people had nothing until Monday.

On the Monday we got a box from Foodbank. Most of the stuff was out of date so I just threw it down the rubbish chute.

And then we got a load from Woolworths, a load from Coles and a load from The Smith Family. It was actually overkill because the majority of people in this block are single occupants.

At one stage I ended up with nine litres of milk. Bloody ridiculous.

There was no knock on the door to tell you when food was delivered. You'd see people walking past through the window and you'd open the door and the stuff would just be there.

There was no communication about testing, they'd just come to your unit. I had them stick it up my snout and out the back of my brain, down my throat, and that was it. It was done on the Tuesday and I got the result on the Thursday. *Negative.*

The bit that hurt me the most was I couldn't see my grandchildren. But I became resigned to it. I thought; *Five days, I've got to cop this.*

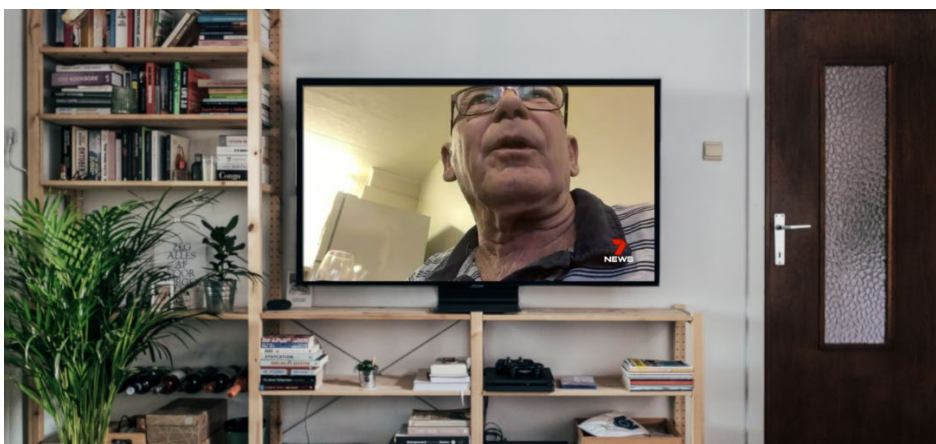
About 4pm Friday, word spread that the lockdown was finally over. I went down at 4:30pm, but the cops said, "No, you can't go out until the morning."

At about 5pm the Premier finally came on TV: 'It's now going to end at 11:59pm.'

That was a kick in the guts.

I had a birthday present for my granddaughter, Elena.

It hurt because I felt like an absolute ratbag for not being able to give her the present and a hug on the day. I don't think any grandparent would feel any differently.



Andrew was interviewed remotely by Seven News on the second day of lockdown.

When I got up the next morning, Saturday, the first thing I did was look down. No coppers. I was allowed out.

It felt bloody beautiful, I can tell you. The weather didn't matter—you were free!

To a certain extent, it felt like incarceration. You're locked up though you've done nothing wrong.

I'm lucky, I've got family who would have delivered stuff (if they could), but there are a lot of people who've got no one. I was also lucky that I had enough medication to get me through.

The other thing is there's people with mental health issues, how did they cope? At least I've got a phone. The bloke in the unit next door to me hasn't got a phone, he's got no contact with the outside world.

We were treated as second class citizens because we're in public housing. If I'd been in a private high-rise block, there is no way known they could have got away with it. They would have had lawyers jumping all over them.

The week was like nothing I've ever experienced. I was angry but I understood, to a certain extent.

But I still think that it could have been handled a lot better.

I think it was done in a very arbitrary way and without any form of compassion. It was humiliating.

If the government have to do a hard lockdown again they should knock on every door, actually tell people what's happening, give them half an hour's notice.

I'm not blaming the police (except for that first one). They acted with great respect.

But I must admit, every morning when I get up I still look out to see if there's coppers downstairs again.

I've got no trust. Simple as that. And we're still now allowed to move around freely, without any restrictions.

When we had SARS, you knew it would come to an end.

We had the global financial crisis; but you could see there was going to be an end to it.

But this? You can't see an end. 🖍️

\*We changed Andrew's surname at his request.

**Andrew Carman, 67, was confined to his one bedroom unit in North Melbourne for five days during the Victorian Government's 'hard lockdown' of nine public housing towers in July 2020.**

This piece is derived from an extensive phone interview with Andrew conducted by VCOSS shortly after the lockdown ended. It was published in July 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.

Edited by Miriam Sved and Ryan Sheales.

## My 'Deaf family' during COVID-19



Tamara Trinder-Scacco

I was born Deaf. All my family are Deaf, my husband and my two daughters too. Ours is a Deaf house.

We can communicate in Auslan and spoken English. We adjust which we use depending on the situation.

I prefer using Auslan because I cannot rely on my hearing. If the person I'm with can't sign I have to rely 100% on lipreading.

Before COVID-19 we could manage fine. My husband and I had support and my daughters had support at school.

*Then COVID-19 happened.*

The first lockdown was an interesting experience, some positive and some negative.

For example my younger daughter, who is 10, had an emergency trip to hospital in an ambulance. Before they picked her up I explained that we were Deaf and needed to be able to see their faces to lipread.

Both paramedics had masks on and I was concerned about that.

But they were really good, they stood two meters away and removed their masks to explain things to me so I could lipread. I was grateful.

It was the same on the ambulance ride to the hospital, they would lower their masks to communicate. I was really thankful for that.

When we arrived at hospital they were stricter about wearing masks. We arrived at 3am and I knew it would be tricky to find an Auslan interpreter at that time. Both my daughter and I would need to be able to lipread to understand what was happening.

At first the doctors used written notes to communicate with us. It worked, but it was slow and time was getting on, my daughter was in pain and I was frantic.

A senior doctor realised that passing notes back and forth was too much, and lowered their mask whilst keeping two meters away. The doctor gave me an update on the plan for my daughter. We had to wait for X-rays and blood tests.

It was stressful, we had to wait a long time and I was twiddling my thumbs with no communication. I could see the doctors talking but couldn't understand what they were saying. It was very isolating.

Another mostly negative experience is the impact on my two daughters of moving to remote learning.

My older girl is in Year 11 and the younger one is in Year 5. Our experience of remote learning in the first lockdown was not good; in fact it was terrible.

Both girls' mental health suffered because they didn't have enough face-to-face access with their teachers.

Like many children who are Deaf or hard of hearing, they found working online using Google Meet exhausting because they had to focus closely on the screen to be able to lipread or read captions.

The children need to be mindful of not trying to rush through their work to get everything done. In the second lockdown I have reminded my girls that they can only do their best and if they don't get everything done they should accept it and move on. But it's hard.

For my older daughter, who is doing her VCE, I'm concerned about the impact of remote learning on her marks. I hope it won't have a long-term impact on her future.

And I really hope that remote learning does not have a long-term impact on the girls' mental health.

I understand that Stage Four restrictions are limiting what everyone can do, but they have extra impact on me as a Deaf person. For example, it's a challenge when we need to go shopping. The wider community is generally not aware that if they meet a Deaf person they are allowed to remove their mask so the person can lipread, keeping a two meter distance and replacing their mask when they finish speaking.

I can't force someone to remove their mask but it challenges me and affects my mental health.

There is some amazing technology available, really brilliant, but because I've been using this technology a lot since March it has become completely exhausting.

I use screens for about 12 hours a day: for work, interacting with clients, and personal communication like catching up with family and friends. It's a challenge for Deaf people, especially when they're meeting new people online. Sometimes I try to avoid going on social media or talking to anyone during my downtime.

It's wonderful to have interpreters on the TV for breaking news, but it was not easy to set up. The Deaf community and Deaf organisations had to lobby and advocate for Deaf people to have access to these interpreter services.

We should not have to fight so hard for our basic needs and rights. It is exhausting. It makes me angry. It is a constant battle.

I—along with my immediate family and the wider Deaf community—will have long-term impacts from the COVID-19 situation, especially on our mental health.

Having to find new ways of communicating, navigate constant rule changes and advocate for access to information – these things stay with us for a long time.

As does society’s lack of awareness. My Deaf peers and their families are often abused by the community for not wearing masks when they need to communicate.

I would like to see people be less judgemental. It doesn’t cost anything to be kind. 🖍️

**Tamara Trinder-Scacco** was deaf from birth. She attended mainstream schools growing up, which was a challenge. Tamara enjoys playing sports, previously representing Australian and Victorian Deaf sport teams.

Married for 16 years with two children (16 & 11), Tamara works as a support coordinator team leader at Deaf Children Australia. She enjoys empowering and making a difference in deaf clients’ and families’ lives.

Tamara’s story was published in July 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.

## Locked down and locked out: the struggle to survive with no support



Namya Bihar\*

I'm a single mother who's been in Australia since 2014.

My boy is in Grade 7 and my girl is in Grade 1.

Before the virus I had a part-time job and a casual job. I was a cooking instructor and a sous chef, so I was earning good money and managing all my finances.

I lost both jobs in March.

Most people have resources or support from Centrelink to cope in this pandemic, but I'm on a bridging visa. I'm not eligible for JobKeeper or JobSeeker, I don't have any income from the government.

One of my jobs was for the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, in their catering company. At the start they kept paying me, at a reduced rate, about \$600 a fortnight from March until May.

Then they said *no, sorry, we can't pay you anymore until the catering company comes back.*

It's very hard to manage. Sometimes we don't have enough to eat.

Luckily we have a house, and my landlord knows my situation. He has said it's okay if we can't pay now, but we have to pay it all together whenever the pandemic's finished.

If my landlord says that we have to pay then I don't know... Maybe I can ask the council if they can help. Sometimes they provide homeless people with shelter or put them in share houses. It would be very hard with two kids.

There's a lot of stress. I'm behind on all the bills. Companies know that everybody's suffering and they give us extensions. But we sleep in one room and don't turn on the heaters, we cover up and wear shoes in the house, and whenever there's sunshine we sit outside. The past couple of weeks it was very, very cold. The children were wrapped in blankets.

Luckily there is the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, and we receive food from them once a fortnight. We eat what we have, if we only have apples and oranges we survive on that. But it's not enough for us. Mostly we have one proper meal a day.



The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre provides food to migrant and refugee families in need.

I found out there is a church that does food parcels, but it's 6.9 kilometers away. If somebody stops me I can't afford a \$1,500 fine. I'm afraid of that.

The children are okay. They don't know what's going on. They're pretty happy at home, happy they don't have to get ready and go in the rain to school.

The school is very good, they said they could provide me with an iPad for my daughter. They can chat with friends on Zoom on the tablet, and use it for teacher meetings. So that's good. And the school is helping by not asking for any fees.

But often it's hard to make them do school work, they just watch YouTube and play games, which is so stressful for me. The teachers only come on for 15 minutes.

We have nothing to do at home. Sometimes the kids want to go to the park, they want to go for a walk, but I'm scared to go outside. I tell them no, you will touch something. You will play with somebody. This is not allowed at all.

It's like we are in a prison.

When the pandemic had just started my friends asked me if I needed any help. I said no, that it should be fine, I would be okay. But I didn't realise it would go on so long.

I went to the doctor and they said, *Oh, you have a lot of stress*. They gave me a referral for a counselor. I don't want to go to a counselor, but the doctor said she had to give me a referral as a duty of care. So I saw the counselor, but she just talked. There's nothing she can do.



I just pray every day that we will be allowed to go outside of the suburb, just to get food. But we have no idea how long this will go on for, no idea when my employer will reopen. We are still in stage four.

I'll go to the kitchen now to see what I can make for the children. I have some flour. I want to make something for them to make them happy. At least they can still enjoy their life.



\*We changed Namya's name at her request.

This piece is based on an extensive phone interview VCOSS conducted with Namya. It was published in September 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.

Edited by Miriam Sved.

## “It feels really sort of paralysing”: young in the time of COVID



Miray Yilmaz\*

I’m a 21-year-old uni student, studying a double degree in law and global studies.

I definitely feel a big generational divide, and I feel like our experiences of the world are very different to our parents’ ones. In some ways better, but in a lot of ways worse.

There’s a lot more uncertainty. I feel like the times of being able to plan out your career and know that you can afford a house one day, those times are over.

And I think it drives a lot of intense competition in our generation, because we know that only a few of us will be able to have those things. Even at uni there’s hostility between students because of the intense competition, and it really takes a toll on your mental health when everybody is like that.

I don’t begrudge anybody for being competitive, it’s a system we’ve been handed down. We know we have to be very competitive to get a job, or even an unpaid internship. I think I’ve done six unpaid internships now, many of them for six months at a time. We have to do that to be able to get a job one day. Unfortunately that’s just the way it is; we do hours and hours of unpaid work to try and one day, hopefully, get paid work.

I live in the city with a housemate, and Coronavirus has impacted me in many ways. It’s been really difficult, particularly with the lack of certainty.

Prior to COVID I was employed by three different organisations that I would do casual work for, and I also did private tutoring.

As soon as COVID contaminated the world I was told by all those organisations that we wouldn’t have work. At that point they said for the next few months, but there hasn’t been any work for the whole year.

And with my tutoring as well – at the start of the year I had 12 students, but a lot of them were very reluctant to do online tutoring, so after Coronavirus I was only able to maintain three of them.

I have a few diagnosed mental illnesses, the most prominent of which is an eating disorder. That coupled with the fact that I haven’t had secure employment has been really stressful. Psychiatrists

aren't covered by mental health care plans and they cost a few hundred dollars a session, so that's been quite a barrier to accessing mental health help.

And generally Coronavirus has exacerbated my mental illnesses anyway, because of the isolation, and because eating disorders are premised on trying to attain a sense of control over your life. The fact that we've had severe restriction on our movement already lends itself to making eating disorders worse.

It feels really sort of paralysing in terms of what I want to do in the future. I feel very stagnant.

I've been interested in anything to do with women's rights advocacy, and prior to this I was doing an internship at a women's development agency. That got cut short, which was devastating because I'd just started and it was quite a difficult process to get into it. They said it's been postponed but really it's been cancelled.

I have access to youth allowance, which has been really helpful, but there's a great lack of certainty around when they'll take it away or how much they'll decrease it by. When I was getting \$1,100 a fortnight I could absolutely live on it, but now that it's been decreased I'm dipping into the small amount of savings I have. It's quite stressful.

If it got to the stage where I couldn't pay rent I think my landlord would just kick me out. As a young person you don't have that much leverage with your landlord.

I think our generation has a lot to deal with, to be honest. The weight of capitalism, the lack of employment, the amount of our uni fees. Just the fact that we're paying uni fees, whereas the politicians, a lot of them didn't even pay for uni.

And on top of that we've got climate change. And at the same time traditional media seems to hate young people and depict us as very entitled, whiny, privileged children.

Thankfully so far I'm keeping afloat, but I have a few friends who haven't been turning their heaters on and haven't been eating much. I'm very privileged that I haven't had to do that.



\*We changed Miray's name at her request.

This piece is based on an extensive phone interview VCOSS conducted with Miray. It was published in October 2020 as part of the VCOSS *My Corona* series.

Edited by Miriam Sved.

## ‘A bitter pill to swallow’: coping with racism and the virus



Interview with Bayu Pratama

Bayu Pratama has been no stranger to racism since arriving in Australia from Jakarta eight years ago.

But he is pained and appalled by the public treatment he has faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and by racially charged comments he’s seen near daily on social media, through his involvement in community groups.

“A lot people are looking at me as if I was the one who brought in COVID-19 into Australia,” he says.

Bayu often hears people mumble at him on the street, and there has also been blatantly racist behaviour, leaving the 24-year-old feeling hopeless.

On one occasion, while Bayu was walking down the street after buying a coffee, an elderly woman saw him from a considerable distance, stopped and started putting on a mask.

“I feel devastated, I feel angered,” Bayu says. “I feel upset, but at the same time I do feel sorry for her because ... she may not be comfortable around people of colour.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown his wedding plans into disarray and he worries for his fiancée, who remains in West Java, Indonesia, and whom he hasn’t seen since February. He is also devastated by tens of thousands of Indonesians being infected by the virus.

The couple have put their wedding on hold and hope to eventually exchange vows in both countries.

“I don’t think an online wedding would be ideal and it’s not something that I want to try,” Bayu says.

“It’s a celebration once in a lifetime and to do it online, I don’t think it’s reasonable, unless the Zoom party can throw a flower at me, then 100 per cent for sure; then that might be on the agenda.”

Bayu had to defer his university social work studies after being made redundant from his job at the Melbourne Racing Club, where he enjoyed working as a waiter in the evenings.

“I knew that I couldn’t pay for my university if COVID was happening,” he says.

“It’s a bitter pill to swallow ... it has definitely made me stress a lot.”

Bayu now receives the JobSeeker Payment but does not want to rely on such government support long term. He worries about what a post-pandemic economy will look like, particularly for young people and the hospitality industry.

“There are certain stereotypes of being a ‘dole bludger’ but in actual fact I do want to go out and contribute in any way, but unfortunately physical form of contribution to society is being limited so I can’t really do that.”

Bayu says he exercises weekly and meditates daily in an effort to manage the impact of the pandemic on his physical and mental health.

The pandemic has prompted him to cook more fried foods and eat less fresh produce so he can avoid going to the shops, and his typical meal times are later than before; not eating breakfast until midday and dinner until around 9pm.

Bayu leads the AFL Indonesia-affiliated Krakatoas *Football Club*, which shut down during COVID-19 restrictions. For around two months he had no exercise whatsoever for fear of sending the wrong message to his community or catching the virus.

“It’s just, for me, I do have sort of the contradiction of whether that (going outside for exercise) is responsible or irresponsible,” he says.

“So I do have a certain dilemma in my head whether I should go outside – what if I catch COVID-19 and I expose my share housemates?”

Despite the uncertain atmosphere, Bayu says his Caulfield home is filled with laughter and the COVID-19 situation has brought him closer to his five flatmates, who are sharing aspects of their Indian culture with him through food and offering support

**Words:** Melissa Jenkins. (CC-BY-NC.)

**Illustrations:** Jacob Komesaroff. (© VCOSS, 2020.)

Bayu’s story was part of *Good health in the time of COVID* – a joint project between VicHealth and VCOSS that gave voice to the stories of people who were particularly vulnerable to the health, economic and social threats of the pandemic.

## Staying close to nature, staying well



### Interview with Ruth Skewes

Staying connected with friends and nature is an invaluable coping strategy for Ruth Skewes during COVID-19 restrictions.

The 79-year-old passionate bushwalker's social activities have been restricted since January after a back injury. Despite her preference for longer nature adventures, Ruth is happy she can now manage weekly short walks.

Ruth visits the same coffee spot after most outings with a walking buddy, adding that simple routines like this are helping her cope during the pandemic.

"We meet up every so often, about every week ... and have a walk and then a coffee," Ruth says.

"(But) you don't meet the people you normally meet on a bushwalk every week, so that's the hardest – that's frustrating and isolating."

Ruth, who lives alone in Box Hill North, reaps both physical and mental benefits from being close to nature, even if it's just gazing at the towering eucalypts near her local pool, where she did hydrotherapy around four times weekly before COVID-19 restrictions forced the facility to close.

"It's also good for your mental health because outside the windows are the most beautiful gum trees ... I know it's doing me good."

Ruth says her back injury plus the COVID-19 restrictions have meant a loss of independence and she's grateful to have had visits from her daughters under carer rules. She also loaded up on quality time with her three grandchildren – one aged 14 plus 12-year-old twins – before Melbourne's stage four restrictions came into force in August.

Ruth maintains phone contact with friends and offers support to a friend whose husband has dementia. She considers the telephone a lifeline and doesn't enjoy using video applications like Zoom. Her injury and recent surgery means she can't sit down for long, and it's hard to hold a computer while lying down.

"I'm over, over screen time," she says.

Fear of contracting COVID-19 has prompted Ruth to drastically reduce outings on public transport, which she would normally use to travel to monthly specialist medical appointments in South Yarra.

“I’m a public transport person, but that’s a real loss actually.”

She wears a mask to go supermarket shopping – and did so before it was made compulsory – as well as gloves, and has no qualms about pulling up fellow shoppers who don’t observe the 1.5 metre social distancing requirement.

“A lot of people don’t socially distance and couldn’t care less unfortunately,” Ruth says.

“Some supermarkets are just not nice to go to. Others are better at controlling numbers. A lot of people I’ve had to ask, ‘would you mind social distancing when we’re in the queue?’ And one guy apologised – some people just forget.”

**Words:** Melissa Jenkins. (CC-BY-NC.)

**Illustrations:** Jacob Komesaroff. (© VCOSS, 2020.)

Ruth’s story was part of *Good health in the time of COVID*.

## ‘Pretty crap at the moment to be honest’: life on disability pension



Interview with Caryn Hearsch

Writing a shopping list, pushing a trolley through supermarket aisles and collecting groceries might seem like mundane tasks most of us do week in, week out.

But they aren't routine for many people in our community, particularly those struggling to find work against the backdrop of COVID-19 restrictions in Victoria.

Take for example Caryn Hearsch, who has been jobless since 2017 and hasn't done a substantial supermarket food shop in around seven years.

"I get milk and bread occasionally. I have a friend that brings me sometimes a bit of other bits and pieces," the 63-year-old explains.

"But to be able to like plan a shopping list and push a trolley around all the aisles – I wouldn't know where to start now."

Caryn was receiving JobSeeker payments until recently moving onto a disability pension. She received \$1,100 a fortnight after the Coronavirus Supplement was added to the base JobSeeker payment but is now instead paid a disability pension of \$944 fortnightly.

It's a struggle for Caryn to pay the mortgage on her Hoppers Crossing home and buy food and medicine for various medical conditions, including depression and high blood pressure. The grandmother of two used to try to earn money by selling items at a trash and treasure market in Geelong but stopped when the pandemic hit, resorting to listing some of her possessions for sale online.

"I don't have any other option, I have to rely on the pittance that the (federal) government gives me and just pray to God that I can keep paying my mortgage, which is my priority, and just try and keep up with the other bills as best I can," she says.

"No one should have to be making choices between food and bills, medication and bills. But we are.

"I was brought up with (the idea) Australia's the lucky country. Where has it gone?"



Caryn has applied for more than 700 jobs over the past eight years, after seriously injuring herself when she slipped on a freshly washed floor in 2012. She had to have reconstructive surgery on both shoulders after her accident.

“After my accident ... my life just really ended,” she says.

Before her injury she worked as a medical secretary for 49 years at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and the Melbourne Brain Centre at the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

A few years after her accident, Caryn retrained as a teaching assistant and managed to secure one six-month contract and one six-week stint at a school, but hasn’t worked since her last contract ended in 2017.

“I just feel I’m, I’m worthless. I am not contributing to the world, I’m not bringing an income in,” Caryn says.

“Life’s pretty crap at the moment to be honest, only because not working has had such a huge, huge impact on my mental health.”

The pandemic has compounded Caryn’s mental health struggles and she recently contemplated taking her own life.

Caryn says her best friend Lynne, who lives in Queensland, is like a sister to her. She was hoping to try and visit Lynne this year but that plan is now off the agenda due to border closures and other COVID-19 restrictions.

Caryn stays in regular phone and video contact with her daughter Emma, who is based in Romsey, some 80 kilometres away, and her grandchildren – Aurora, who is nearly eight, and Cody, who turns six in August.

She says it’s heartbreaking not being able to see her family, particularly for Cody’s birthday, and she’s worried about whether she’ll be able to see them again at all.

“I’m here, she and the grandchildren are up there. The way this world is like, nobody knows what’s going to happen tomorrow.”

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Caryn’s story was part of *Good health in the time of COVID*

## Forced to embrace technology



### Interview with John Douch

John Douch isn't too fussed by the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, having served in Vietnam and Singapore with the Australian Defence Force and, later, lived through the 1990s recession.

"Us oldies, if I could put it that way, are fairly used to challenges throughout life," the 73-year-old says.

"It's probably worse for the youngies. This is a big challenge for them; it's probably their first big challenge."

John has a lot on his plate, managing multiple myeloma, a cancer that develops from plasma cells in bone marrow. He's also caring for his wife who has various medical issues.

Recently, John noticed his anxiety levels heighten, describing himself as becoming a little short tempered, so he took steps to take time out and look after himself.

For John, looking after himself both physically and mentally means daily walks in the fresh air.

Before COVID-19 restrictions hit, every Sunday morning John would travel to Melbourne Airport and 'plane spot,' watching and listening to the aircraft.

He would also travel by train once a month to country Victoria, enjoying chatting with fellow passengers on the journey.

"There are times when I'd hop on the train on a Sunday morning and go up to bloody Albury (just over the NSW border) and back or to a country town just for the love of it because on public transport you meet people and you can talk to people," he says.

"I'm a people's person, I know I am, so therefore I just sit there and talk and chat, and it's great fun.

"You miss the things that you like that you can't do but you need to be able to handle that and, as one gentleman said to me many, many years ago, worry about the things that you can control, the stuff you can't, don't."

During the pandemic, John has driven himself to medical appointments rather than risk being close to someone with COVID-19 on public transport or in a taxi.

He registered for online shopping but decided to continue going to the supermarket himself despite having a compromised immune system due to his illness.

“Even though I registered for it I kind of railed against all of that. I thought ‘no, I’ve got to get out there and do what I usually did without putting myself at risk’.

“So I made that decision but at the same time my hands have never been cleaner.”

The pandemic has forced John to embrace technology like Zoom to keep in touch with members of the men’s discussion organisation he is involved with – Older Men: New Ideas – which is facilitated by COTA Victoria and has groups across the state for men aged over 50.

Even though he telephones group members and uses technology like Zoom to check in on mates and make sure they’re okay, he misses the in-person chats they had pre-pandemic.

“You’re not kind of getting that closeness that you had before,” John says.

“When you’re doing Zoom it’s like talking to a bloody computer.”

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## ‘I’m going to have to make some tough choices’: Struggling for the basics



Interview with Mandy Weber

Mandy Weber and her two teenage daughters face the prospect of homelessness for a sixth time once the JobSeeker Coronavirus Supplement is cut in September, and possibly disappears in 2020.

The single mum was just two days away from starting a full-time job as a chef when COVID-19 and the lockdown struck. The venue closed and she lost her position.

Mandy receives JobSeeker payments, which will fall from \$1,100 to \$800 a fortnight on September 24. The Federal Government has not yet confirmed what will happen to the payment, paid to 1.6 million Australians, beyond 2020.

Mandy says the Coronavirus Supplement, which has put an extra \$275 a week in her pocket, has been a lifeline.

“It’s been good having the extra money; it’s been like a lifesaver,” she says.

The supplement has meant Mandy’s family has been able to eat three meals a day, when previously they may have only been able to have one. They have been able to eat more fruit and vegetables – instead of relying on cheap meals like pasta bake to fill them up – buy warmer clothes and blankets and purchase eyewear and medication.

Mandy has also been able to buy cleaning products and basic toiletries for her family, who rent in Bacchus Marsh, west of Melbourne.

“We went four weeks without soap in the house and we had to wash our clothes with shampoo because it was cheaper,” she says.

When the supplement is reduced, Mandy says it will be a struggle to afford medication she needs to help manage her anxiety, depression and panic attacks.

After the supplement stops, and if the base JobSeeker Payment remains at the same level, Mandy would be left with around \$40 to \$50 a week to buy food and medication, after paying rent and making the minimum payments on gas, electricity and water bills.

“Once it cuts, I’m going to have to make some tough choices again on what can be paid, what should be paid and whether we can afford three meals a day.”

Mandy has been homeless five times in the five years she received the Newstart Allowance – which was replaced by the JobSeeker Payment – despite working casual or part-time hours cooking or cleaning.

“We ended up homeless – we couldn’t afford our rent, we couldn’t afford our bills,” she explains.

“It’s not fun being a parent and not being able to give your kids what they need, just the basics that they need.”

The 48-year-old has two adult children who live elsewhere and two teenage daughters who live with her. Her daughters were previously employed at fast food chains and helped buy food and other household essentials, but are currently hunting for work.

Mandy says her age will make it more difficult to find work than if she were younger, adding jobs in the hospitality industry can attract scores of applicants.

She likes spending time with family or in solitude, but also relied on her previous job for social contact.

“When I go to work, that would be my social outlet, my little time with people and then I come home to my own space again,” she says.

“(The COVID-19 situation) has affected our mental health hugely in this house.”

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**Mandy’s story was part of *Good health in the time of COVID***

## ‘You have to be your own cheerleader’: staying positive in COVID



Interview with Meena\*

If you’re looking for a strong, resilient and resourceful mother, look no further than domestic violence survivor Meena\*.

The single mum, who lives in social housing in Melbourne’s South East, is squarely focused on staying positive and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic so she can best care for her four-year-old daughter, Sienna\*.

Meena has experienced immense hardship in recent years, enduring domestic violence that led to post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety, as well a permanent disability in her right knee. She was also made redundant and lost her father, who had dementia and Parkinson’s disease.

“I’d hit rock bottom mentally – and having to look after Sienna (and) still be cheerful, I think brought such a lot of resilience in me,” she says.

“I said ... you know, if I’ve survived the worst, everything else is a piece of cake. So I’ve got myself out of that sort of place.”

Meena says that, although COVID-19 has been devastating, it has given her a chance to pause and map out where she wants to take her life.

“It’s also given me a time to reflect on what’s really, really important with everything that’s happening. And so I said, ‘I’ve got to turn things around’. The thing I was most passionate about was to use my strengths to help other men and women facing family violence.”

She will start a Certificate III in Community Services this year and hopes to continue her studies through a Masters of Social Work in 2021.

Meena is on a strict grocery budget but is determined for her and Sienna to continue to eat healthy, fresh food during the pandemic.

During the first lockdown and panic buying, her grocery budget was stretched due to the lack of usual special offers from the supermarkets, and Meena would cut her own portion sizes to manage.

Now, she has resumed normal portion sizes because she wants to stay fit and healthy, adding she often uses YouTube to do ‘P.E. With Joe’ exercise sessions with Sienna.

“If I fall sick, there’s no plan B looking after Sienna, so I have to look after myself,” Meena says.

“Eating junk food is so much cheaper. You could get a massive bag of crisps for say maybe two dollars, but every avocado costs about two dollars – two or three. So healthy living comes with a price. I look at it now as an investment into my long life.”

The 38-year-old says her contact with friends is less frequent than before the pandemic but she enjoys chatting on Zoom, adding she thinks online catch-ups will become the new normal and are safer, cheaper and more relaxed than heading out to restaurants.

“You buy yourselves the best bottle of wine you can and have girls’ night and you’re safe,” Meena says.

“You don’t have to drive anywhere either – you’re at home; you can just flop down on the couch and that’s it. So I think it’s going to change things for the better.”

Every night after putting Sienna to bed, Meena watches uplifting TED Talks and listens to the likes of Oprah and Brené Brown to boost her mood.

“Staying in isolation... especially with someone who’s separated, there’s not another partner you can bounce things off of or, you know, cheer you on,” she explains.

“So you have to be your own cheerleader.”

\*Names have been changed

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