


OVERCONSUMPTION

PANDEMIC EPIPHANIES



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

PANDEMIC EPIPHANIES



Millions locked into the consumer 'work and spend' cycle experienced something different during the global pandemic, rethinking what really matters

Eat, sleep, work, shop – sometimes in consumer societies it seems as if there's not much more to life. In pre-pandemic days, the old economic system wanted and expected people to behave as selfish, competitive individuals. But the virus not only brought out the best in many people, with millions enthusiastically making sacrifices to help others and put public safety first, it also created an opportunity for millions to rethink what mattered in life and seek to escape the 'work and spend' consumer trap.¹

For many, this meant making time for creativity, activism, community volunteering, spending time with friends and family, and to grow as people. Demands for better work-life balance, made possible by a shift to a shorter working week, are also on the increase. As a mirror of the rapid transitions needed for the climate and ecological emergency, people themselves have experienced transformations. It could be called the great pandemic epiphany.

As COVID-19 rapidly spread around the world, and governments demanded that citizens stay at home to halt its transmission, the daily lives of billions were turned on their heads. Almost overnight, the rhythms and grooves of everyday life were put on pause. Many people were unprepared for the challenges this would bring. After all, daily habits are what we use to navigate the trials and tribulations of life; they shape the way people move around, how communities interact, and underpin the values many hold dear.

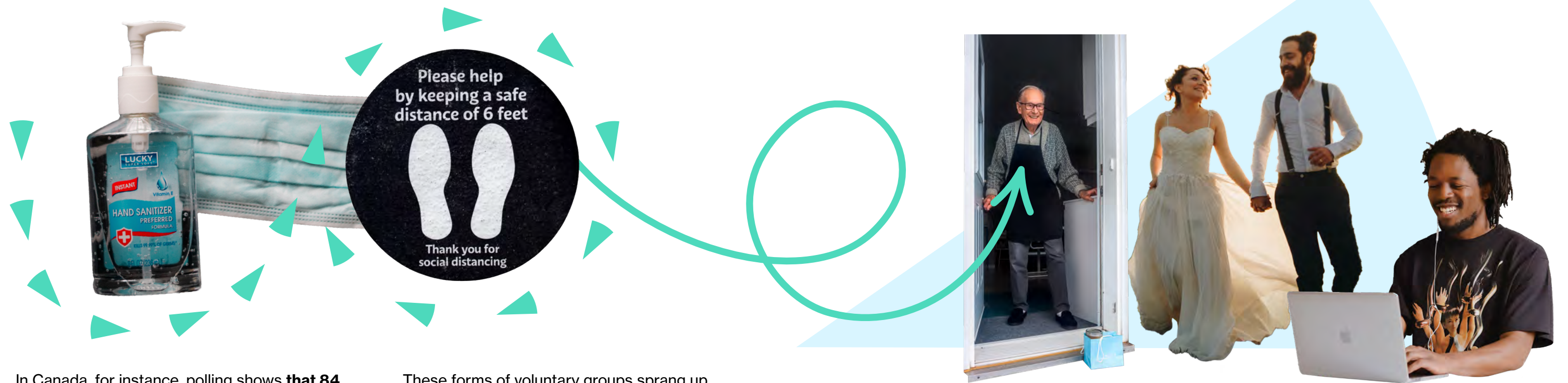
"Covid has jolted the record player of all our lives. The new experiences people have had as a result means that, as the needle returns to the vinyl, we could find ourselves in a different groove."

Leo Murray, director of innovation at Possible

At the onset of the pandemic, when an understanding of the virus was in the nascent stages and there were no viable means of preventing infection and death, people's priorities shifted rapidly. Decades of ingrained individualism were upended by governments' pleas for people to protect one another through social distancing and a mutual respect. Some were worried that the virus would take advantage of an individualistic culture, but evidence strongly suggests that people went above and beyond government guidelines – time and time again – in order to keep their fellow citizens safe and do their bit to halt the spread of the virus.



People were not only more willing to volunteer within the community, but they also had more time to reflect on what was important to their life



In Canada, for instance, polling shows **that 84 percent of citizens complied with COVID-19 restrictions most of the time.**² **Figures from the UK paint a similar picture**³ with the compliance rates of social distancing remaining in the range of 80 per cent, **despite the government's official advisors expecting rates of between 50 and 75 percent**⁴. Regardless of what individual citizens wanted to do and the disruption that lockdowns and social distancing caused, high compliance rates across different contexts suggests that people were prepared to put self-interest to one side in favour of keeping both their loved ones and complete strangers safe.

Alongside this civic duty to slow the spread of the virus, there was an increase in community initiatives that sought to help people meet their needs. Mutual aid, a form of voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit, swept across countries and empowered communities. The UK saw **4,300 mutual aid groups blossom in the first throes of the lockdown**⁵, with citizens offering help to the vulnerable or those needed to self-isolate, as well as exchanging everything from baked goods to exercise classes. For many of the citizens that engaged in these mutual aid groups, it was their first step into community activism and brought with it a whole host of benefits, **including significant improvements in mental health, community identification and people's sense of belonging**⁶.

These forms of voluntary groups sprang up due to many people having more free time. While not ubiquitous, the pandemic enabled many people to work from home while others couldn't work at all. The increase in free time meant that people were not only more willing to volunteer within the community, but they also had more time to reflect on what was important to their life.

One study from Germany⁷ found that respondents used this additional time to go outdoors, to experience nature more intensely, to spend more time with their partner and their children – and generally to have more time for themselves. **Many within the study**⁸ used this time to reflect on those things which may give meaning in life, to reflect on what is essential to a good life, and also as a hint to change certain aspects of life, to be more aware of nature and of people around them and to deal more mindfully with those people.

One symptom of this re-evaluation of what matters is the growing demands for a four day working week. Having got used to an abundance of free time, many people are unsurprisingly reluctant to return to work five days a week. There is currently a pilot study underway in the UK, run by think-tank Autonomy, involving 50 businesses around the country and trialling a four-day week to boost productivity and halt burnout. Governments are supporting companies and workers demanding more free time too, with the **Belgian government recently giving workers the right to request a four-day week**⁹.

“The pandemic has certainly accelerated a shift in attitudes towards work-life balance. While the desire to cut down on working time and make greater space for life away from work isn't new, the overnight shift to remote working experienced by many has revealed that working practices aren't set in stone – they can be rapidly changed. Policies like the four-day working week with no loss in pay have therefore begun to appear much more feasible to both workers and businesses alike. Few are eager to simply return to the ‘old ways’ from before the pandemic, and want to capitalise on a chance to experiment with alternatives. Given the interest we've seen in our forthcoming four-day week pilot, a reduction in working time is at the front and centre.”

Jack Kellam, researcher at think-tank Autonomy

A shift in what a person values and wants from their life is common after a traumatic or stressful event – which the pandemic most certainly was. **Studies show**¹⁰ that in the wake of natural disasters and traumatic events people are more likely to make big transitional decisions in their lives, such as getting married or divorced. Psychologists have labelled this phenomena as **‘posttraumatic growth’**¹¹ or **‘spiritual transformation’**¹², where pivotal junctures in life cause people to search for meaning and support in other areas of their life, leaving behind old behaviours and values.

In the wake of the pandemic, as the world emerges from restrictions, there is an opportunity to leverage some of these more social and collective shifts in values and sentiments to accelerate the transitions in energy, lifestyles and consumption patterns. Not only could this break the cycle of expensive overconsumption that never satisfies, but it could help people live healthier lives with much higher well being. The boost it may also give to active citizenship could help solve multiple other engrained social problems, and give people the time and motivation to engage enthusiastically in the great task of rapid, low carbon transition.

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This guide has been made possible by the support of ClimateWorks Foundation – climateworks.org – and is published by the Rapid Transition Alliance – rapidtransition.org – where you can find many of these examples explored in more detail.

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