

We had to create a monster. A monster so huge and so terrifying that we were sufficiently motivated. Motivated to make the changes, stop doing many things, and start doing other things. Things that we would never had considered, never had the strength to do, had this monster not been out there on the loose. The monster was of course the fear of the COVID-19 virus and its creation was easy, as we all watched the horrors unfolding from China and into Europe. Images of teams of healthcare workers in full PPE, patients struggling to breathe behind oxygen masks, streets empty as lockdowns were imposed, panicked and exhausted doctors trying to warn the world what was coming to them. The monster was not just the virus though, who's danger and deadliness were becoming clear. The monster was also the fear of us catching it, the risk of transmission, it's invisible infectivity. Alarming graphs of rising cases, coupled by stories of transmission from petrol pumps, delivered parcels, and supermarket packets of food grew our monster into a gigantic beast, a snarling, drooling unseen hideousness.

The 'we' that I talk of, is a group I newly found myself in; the shielded, the extremely vulnerable. Me and 2 million of my closest friends had to take more drastic action, shut ourselves away, bar the doors and eliminate the outside world from our lives. Our monster was bigger. It had to be, to motivate us to say goodbye to everything and everyone, back in the middle of March. Until when? Well, we just had no idea.

ONSET

I had been a healthy 50-year-old GP, who enjoyed running up big hills and cycling up even bigger ones. Then last September, with no warning, I collapsed when out on a run, and very suddenly I had crossed the line and I was now a patient. Four weeks as an inpatient, continually monitored and undergoing increasingly unpleasant investigations (cardiac biopsy while awake, anyone?), I ended up with a diagnosis of primary cardiac sarcoidosis. Who knew that was even a



Martin Billington

thing? My care by the NHS had been impeccable. I left hospital in tearful gratitude, with a newly-inserted defibrillator and a bag full of steroids. My recovery was slow as I considered my brush with death, my new limitations, and losses, coupled with my appreciation that I was alive, when for others this was a post-mortem diagnosis.

LIVING WITH THE MONSTER

In early spring I began to think about when I could return to work. As well as a GP, I was an undergraduate tutor and an appraiser, and I missed it all. But then the monster began to emerge. Embarrassingly some of us laughed it off, denying the inevitable reality. But as we all began washing our hands and watching daily briefings, I became more fearful. I had survived 40 minutes of ventricular tachycardia lying on a track on the edge of The Peak District, but was I now going to succumb to a deadly virus preying on my new vulnerability?

A telephone call from one of my consultants tipped me off a few days before the shielding advice was announced. He gave me some pretty stark facts. The monster began to loom high above me. I lived with my key worker wife and our three teenagers; we considered how we could protect me sufficiently at home, but it looked impossible. So just a few hours later I tearfully hugged my wife and kids and moved out to a flat

generously offered by a friend, who I tell, may have saved my life.

The monster fed our paranoia, or was it sensible precaution? I left post for 3 days before touching it, I washed up the food supplies that my wife dropped off, I sanitised packets of tablets from the chemist. I thought about people who suffered cleaning obsessive compulsive disorder, normally buying several bottles of bleach a week, and thought how awful this period must be for them. Twelve weeks of shielding, away from my family, seemed an impossibly long time, I couldn't comprehend it. I hated the phrase 'the new normal'. This was not normal. I stopped following the news as it made me too anxious. I became annoyed with friends who insisted on discussing COVID-19 all the time. Well, what else was there to talk about? Despite Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp and the rest, I felt immensely lonely at times. Days turned into weeks merged into months. Anxiety ebbed and flowed; the fear of the monster influenced everything.

And then as the numbers began to fall, we were suddenly told we would have to learn to mix with the monster again. He wasn't so dangerous; we would be fine. We could even go back to work soon. I was shocked and relieved and confused. COVID-19 would do the same to me now as it would have 4 months ago. I went for a first walk with my wife, through green fields in hot sunshine. *'It's gorgeous isn't it? How are you feeling?'* she carefully enquired, *'Everything is out of my comfort zone,'* I tentatively replied, feeling pathetic, but honest.

So, we the shielded, are being asked to move from essentially no risk, to an undefinable, unguaranteeable low-risk situation. I am immensely thankful to be considering moving back home, but I am fearful, apprehensive, and asking myself will I live and die to regret this?

Somehow, we have to learn to walk with this monster.

Martin Billington,

GP and GP appraiser; Honorary Senior Clinical Lecturer, Academic Unit of Primary Medical Care, University of Sheffield, Sheffield.

Email: m.billington@sheffield.ac.uk

This article was first posted on *BJGP Life* on 28 July 2020: <https://bjgp.life.com/monster>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp20X712409>

"... as the numbers began to fall, we were suddenly told we would have to learn to mix with the monster again. He wasn't so dangerous; we would be fine."
