



The World Transformed

Consciousness Raising Under Lockdown: A Report

We did consciousness-raising under lock-down and this is what happened

Life under lock-down has raised certain questions: How is being confined in our homes affecting our thought patterns and behaviours? How is this weird point in history affecting us and making us feel? Will the experience of the pandemic give us a new perspective on the political and economic dynamics that structure our lives? How do we mitigate any claustrophobic feelings or loneliness as we were stuck in our houses away from people we care about?

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The idea came up in a conversation between a few of us who thought that an online consciousness-raising exercise may be a good experiment to run in these unprecedented times. The following is a report that we have written about the experience and our reflections on setting up an online consciousness-raising group in late March as the UK went into its Covid-19 lock-down. As an experiment we have not written this as a manual in which to follow exact instructions but outlined what we did and reflected on the experience. At the end of the document we have written some tips on how you also may approach this if this has interested you and would also like to run your own online consciousness-raising group.

What is consciousness raising?

Consciousness raising (CR) - in the form that we employed - is a practice of building collective awareness used by different groups over history to create the capacity for greater awareness or emancipation. It was the organisational bedrock of second wave feminism from 1960-80s and gave birth to the phrase, *the personal is political*. Women got together in groups and talked about their own lives, which led to the realisation for many that their frustrations, problems etc were not individual to them, but structural. These meetings were often held in living rooms and the same group of people met week after week. Meetings were informal in their nature, and in many



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reports of those that took place, there is no chair, no agenda, and no fixed structure to these meetings.

How did we find out about consciousness raising?

In 2015-16 the group Plan C experimented with consciousness raising groups around the UK. The list of questions were chosen to tease out commonalities of people's experience living under late capitalism. Influenced by these experiments the social theorist Mark Fisher used consciousness raising as a key frame for his unfinished book, *Acid Communism*. Shocked by Mark's death in 2017 and wanting to keep working with his ideas, some of us developed a workshop which used consciousness raising techniques to discuss a world beyond capitalism. At the same time, following the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, some of us involved in and around The World Transformed started convening around the idea of Acid Corbynism, which led to a series of events including CR workshops at TWT festivals between 2017-2019. This in turn led to the #ACFM podcast on Novara Media, a show exploring left-wing politics and its links to culture, music and collective joy, which also featured an episode exploring consciousness-raising as a practice. So most of us had at least thought about this technique or read about its use in history before.

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So how did it actually work? What did you do?

In summary we got a group of people together and met on Zoom. We took a couple of minutes to make sure everyone we were expecting was there and we were all settled, with cups of tea, water etc, and during that time there was a bit of chat. We would then nominate someone to ask the questions for that session. That person would open the session by checking we were all ready to start, and then asking the first question: *So, how are you feeling?* We then each took it in turns to answer. After each person finished their contribution the person asking the questions would softly say *thank you person x*. We sometimes took a comfort break for 2-5 minutes in between the two questions. We then did the same with a second question which we had already agreed on in the week before the session. Once the go round of the



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second question was over, some of us sometimes hung out for longer for chats but only after we closed the conscious-ness raising session.

It's worth mentioning that we set up a Whatsapp group to remind each other that the meeting was happening each week and send the Zoom link, but we did not discuss anything that was brought up in the CR session itself on that group.

How did you decide on the questions?

Some members of the group decided the questions each week, although prior experience is not necessary to form questions. The rest of the group felt it was better not to know the questions ahead of time however this imbalance in knowledge did not significantly impact the group.

The way each question was phrased is important. Questions should be open and help people to examine their own feelings, rather than talk *about* the question.

A good example of this is when we asked: *"How have your relationships changed during lockdown?"* The openness of the question allowed each of us to interpret it differently, commenting on the different types of relationships that are personal to us (rather than imposing something more specific like family or friends) and how that made us feel about those relationships. There is no right or wrong answer in CR and by using personal addresses such as "you" or "your" invites a personal response.

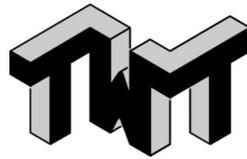
Another example is when we asked *"What feelings do you have about the future?"*. Again, by framing this in open terms, not specifying what kind of feelings or making assumptions, you allow someone to answer in a way that is personal to them.

The short list of questions we came up with is at the bottom of this resource.

Who made up the group?

The group was composed of eleven people - all who had a connection to at least a few others in the group - mostly through TWT or the #ACFM podcast. Nobody knew every person who made up the group. However, some of us had worked together and others were good friends.

Two of the participants were living together and are a couple, but attended 'on one screen'. When they reflected on the experience, they agreed that this format worked



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for them and didn't compromise their individuality in answering questions. They noted that they did make an effort to look at the screen and not look at each other throughout the session. They also didn't discuss privately what they were going to talk about beforehand. For the rest of us, we reflected that having two people on one screen made no difference to the way the sessions functioned and didn't alter the dynamic of their contributions.

As it happened, not everyone was able to attend every single session, but most sessions had nine of us in attendance. After a few sessions we reflected that seven was probably an ideal number.

At one point we reflected that it may be interesting for the same group of people to go to the pub together after lock-down ended and observe how we would relate in real life.

When did the sessions take place and how long for?

The first week we decided to meet on Zoom on Friday at 8pm which ended up being the time slot we kept. We felt that a regular time slot meant that people could block it out in their diaries and it minimised the complication of having to schedule each session across eleven people. In practice the sessions lasted between 60 to 90 minutes with one going over two hours - but only because we wanted to stay longer! At week five and six we spent half an hour reflecting on how the process was going, what worked in terms of facilitation and how we felt about the whole experience during and after the sessions.

Were the sessions relaxed? Did you not struggle with the long calls or get Zoom fatigue?

We didn't impose any strict rules but there were some grounding principles that we built as the sessions went on. For example, we agreed that everyone needed to have their camera on. We agreed that this couldn't be something you were doing 'in the background' while cooking or caring for someone, for example, or in a noisy room. We also agreed that participants needed to put their phones away during the session, and to make sure they were not moving the screen around, ie this wouldnt work while you're having a walk in the park, and is not the sort of event you can drop in and out of. We recognised that this was a commitment which needed everyone to come focused and settled so we ensured attention on ourselves and each other.



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We also agreed on complete confidentiality: what goes on CR, stays on CR - no sharing of anything anyone said, outside that space.

In the first few weeks, we had the chat enabled and a few comments were made when people were speaking, supporting or agreeing with what was being said. However, we felt this created a bit of a distraction and created a sort of second narrative, and so we decided to disable the chat. We didn't want people to interject when people were contributing, just to allow the speaker to have the space to talk. We felt it was ok to second/reference what someone says in one's own contribution if something resonated, but that is the only time we referenced each other.

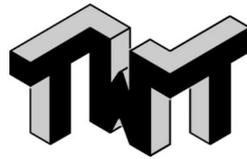
Some of us also decided to use the "hide-self-view" function, allowing us not to be distracted by the sometimes strange sensation of watching yourself speak, and instead focused on looking at everyone else on the screen. Most of us used the grid view function on the screen so that we could see everyone at the same time.

We also tried to limit any "in-jokes" or work/politics chat in the beginning and end to try and minimise the unintentional building of exclusive sub cultures between people in the group, or topics which not everyone felt they could participate in.

Incredibly, by the second session, most of us were in agreement that ***the sessions felt very different to every other Zoom call we had been a part of in lock down so far.*** In the last couple of months most of us have endured hours of online meetings everyday and the dizzying feeling of having square eyes at the end of each day. Even though our sessions were often two hours long we all commented on how strangely the experience didn't exhaust in the same way as other meetings have.

In fact it felt like a pensive, reflective and calm space, and many of us actively looked forward to it every week. It also gave structure to some of our experiences of the time frame that is a week at a time where to some time felt distorted, sped up or slowed down. We felt we were building a community of trust over Zoom, and the #ACFM crew even reported that they thought it affected their vibe on their own chat and on the podcast itself.

We would love to hear about your experiences if you try this out. Please write to us by emailing us at Notaloneintheworld123@gmail.com with your experiences of online consciousness raising.



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Testimonies from participants

“Having something weekly to devote purely to reflection, listening and learning together made a massive impact on the way I navigated the weird world of lockdown. It felt very different to other online meetings and social events, mainly that it was a calm space to both listen and reflect on the complexities of both my own but others' experiences of lockdown. It was a really valuable experience for me to make new connections and a sense of solidarity which is something I've missed, and I really appreciate the sincerity of people's contributions and found real comfort in the experience. In moments when someone contributed something that really resonated with us all, there were some wonderful moments of collective raising of consciousness which I think helped us bond to the experience even more.”

“After some trial and error we ended up adopting quite formal rules in the CR sessions aimed at allowing people to speak in their own time, about what they wanted to speak about and not worry about being interrupted or pressured.” This meant that while we were responding to questions a lot of the conventions of normal conversation had to be suspended. I in particular found it hard not to go first to fill any silence. But this didn't mean that CR wasn't a conversation. Sometimes people took their turn to vent, to get things off their chest, to verbalise things that had been going around their heads, often you didn't know you were going to do that until you started talking, but quite often people picked up from and referred to what others had said. When people made particularly insightful comments in response to a particular question people tended to run with it. I found those the most exciting moments, because I was seeing things from a different angle and understanding the world a little differently. It sometimes felt like we were creating new knowledge together, which can be quite exhilarating.”

“My experience of our CR group has been very positive. Of the various online environments I have been using during the lockdown, it is the one in which I feel most connected to fellow participants, engaging in active listening and having the discipline not to be distracted or multi-task. I think it is important to underline that the more you put into the experience - in both attention and sincerity - the more you'll get out. I would also add that as someone who naturally fills a silence and makes jokes, it is a good reflexive process to allow yourself not to do that - to sit with the quiet moments and pay close attention respectfully to others. Finally, the elevated



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feeling of having your concerns or thoughts either confirmed or challenged in enlightening ways is great. Sessions are very affirming and fun!”

“These groups have had a really positive effect on me. They’ve made me feel much calmer, somehow suspending the worst effects of zoom life, taking me out of my own head and self obsessions and facilitating genuine connection and presence with comrades. They’ve also reinstalled a sense of routine and structure in lockdown, during a period when time has seemed to accelerate making it difficult to get a grip on the week. It’s been a collective effort in slowing things down and paying attention together. Finding points of identification and drawing out the commonalities in what we’ve all been experiencing, has also definitely been really important for my mental wellbeing. What is so refreshing and invigorating is that the competitive intellectualism that is more or less there in most left spaces, seems to pretty much vanish in CR.”

“CR has had a really profound impact on the way I’ve thought about and felt my way through lockdown. It surprised me in becoming the most open and intimate forum in which I’ve been able to share experiences of lockdown – more so than with friends or family actually, even though I only knew one other participant at the start. I think the formal structure is strangely conducive to that openness, as each person being given space to speak, as well as to listen to others without the imperative to verbally respond, allows/encourages everyone to go quite deep in exploring the questions. The questions were probing but unchallenging and inclusive, which also made for a relaxed and enjoyable time. Definitely a very effective way of processing my own experiences and locating them in a wider context. Great for building a sense of solidarity as well!”

“The most surprising thing about the CR experience for me was that it was never tiring - it always felt relaxing and enlivening, even though in the abstract it can sound like it should be quite hard work. The sense of both shared and divergent experience was very powerful, and seemed to enable everyone involved to feel both less alone and less privately responsible for their own experiences, but also more open to different possibilities in terms of how to relate to or deal with the situations that all of us were facing.”

“I had no idea what to expect the first time I joined the consciousness raising sessions and I’m so glad because there would have been no way to describe the experience without trying it first hand. The weekly opportunity to sincerely and honestly express how I was feeling with no pretense or performance felt slightly



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alien but incredibly healing. Being able to reflect on lockdown through CR has allowed me to engage with it all in a way that feels much more evolved and intentional. The deep listening involved in the process is also quite transformative, to hear genuine accounts from so many people around a similar issue brought moments of connection and validation as well as moments of expansion. Hearing different answers to the same question allowed me to tap into a slightly more nuanced and diverse picture of the experiences of different people under lockdown, something I really appreciated. Overall I have come to look forward to this every week and am so grateful that I was invited to be a part of it.”

“CR was unlike anything I have ever done and I’m so glad I did it. It felt like a cross between casual political conversation with friends and light group therapy. I looked forward to it every week as I was so caught up in work/stress/other things in lockdown I realised it was the only space I actually had to process the current situation. I am an extrovert and really enjoyed being amongst comrades and sharing my frustrations or insights from the week, but ended up getting just as much, if not more, from listening to others (and building a sense of solidarity and not feeling alone) and the format seemed to really suit and support everyone - as we had informal rules about not chipping in verbally, commenting on the chat function or prompting anyone. This also got rid of the pressure to say something funny/meaningful, deliberate or prepared, and I soon started to just start talking and see what would come out - which could often prompt a realisation or insight you didn’t know you had. The best part was when somebody said something unique, insightful or highly relatable, prompting a ‘domino effect’ of agreement and a profound shared experience.”

Questions we asked during sessions

- *How have you been feeling? (we asked this every session - plus another from the list below)*
- *How has the pandemic and lockdown changed the way you see yourself and how you fit into the world?*
- *How has it made you think differently about where you live/your home/the space you live in?*
- *When was the last time you felt hopeful about the future? What was it like?*
- *How have your relationships changed during lockdown?*
- *How do you see your life changing after lockdown?*
- *How has it made you think or feel differently about where you live- your area or your home?*



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- *How do you see your life changing after lockdown?*
- *What feelings do you have about the future?*
- *How has Covid-19 and lockdown changed your relationship to your body?*
- *How has lockdown changed your sense of time?*
- *When was the most and the least free you have felt during lockdown?*
- *What do you remember most vividly about life before lockdown?*