



## Managing a doula team in the Covid-19 crisis

To read or download this Journal in a magazine format on ISSUU, please click [here](#)

[AIMS Journal, 2020, Vol 32, No 2](#)



*By Michelle Bromley-Hesketh*

I sit here, writing this, as we end the sixth week of the Covid-19 school closures and lockdown in the UK.

I am a wife and mother of three children between 15 and 7 plus a stepmother to one more. I am also the director of a doula not-for-profit organisation (funded by various sources including the National Lottery Community Fund and local contracts) and I'm studying a BA (Hons) top-up in counselling and psychotherapy. So my life, at the best of times, is busy and balanced quite precariously. I think anyone with children can relate to this.

I am someone who often reflects and the current pandemic is meaning that I am doing this even more than normal. Reflecting during Covid-19 has been quite difficult. Often while I reflect I find ways to change things I do not particularly want in life, and work out how to change things for the better. However, there are not a lot of options available to change at the moment. This pandemic has taught me that I really just have to accept some things and to pick the battles wisely. My job and life are changing daily at the moment, and in conversations with many other mums and birthworkers it seems I am not alone in learning to accept.

Once the social distancing and lockdown of non-essential services were announced, I had to very quickly adapt my work and home life balance, as I am sure many have. I have had to manage a small team of doulas (six salaried, seven who work on bank contracts), volunteers, admin staff and five counsellors who

usually work in a therapy room and outreach in people's homes to now work in different ways, over the phone and being creative in how we support others. This has been challenging as we all learn new skills. It's been hard accepting that the support that we offer must now be limited to only providing remote support unless there's an emergency or crisis. This just doesn't sit well with my ethos, nor that of the organisation, and it raises questions as to what is essential support. Nevertheless, we have to explain to families that this currently has to be the case.

Then came the closure of schools. My workforce is mostly mothers and it's been a struggle. We are a flexible organisation when it comes to childcare and children in the workplace, but there is only so much you can do with a child wanting their mother's constant attention, and so some staff have had to be furloughed in response. This has meant a change in the person supporting families. This furlough option has been amazing, allowing us to support staff to not become overwhelmed and burnt out. However, this has left the workload still needing to be picked up by me and other management staff. This has not been easy. I can't wait to have staff back!

Having home educated in the past, I felt that I could do this. Oh how naïve was I! It turns out this schooling at home is nothing like home educating. We can't go out to museums and galleries; even the libraries are closed. There are now five of us in one home almost 24/7. The teens are getting bored, the 7-year-old is bouncy, but my husband and I haven't divorced, yet. It also turns out that my A grades in Maths and Science GCSE are 20 years old and I have forgotten everything. Who knew I'd need that information 20 years later because of a global pandemic?!

Having to adapt to working from home was not really something I had anticipated to be difficult. I often work from home as a business owner, and having previously home educated I felt that all would be well. Again, I was naïve. It turns out I've become quite accustomed to working without children around, and them now being around all the time means there is no quiet space. In my work as a counsellor and also as a doula, I often need to take private, quiet calls. Finding space for this is not easy, or even possible sometimes. I have actually had to say to some scheduled calls that I cannot make it as I have a child needing support. I am grateful to the service users for how understanding and happy they are with the need for flexibility of sessions, even if my inner critic thinks I'm letting people down. Flexibility and acceptance have been a large theme in my work as a counsellor lately.

Studying in all this has been really difficult. It appears that every third-year BA student has been a little bit forgotten about in terms of assessments. We are expected to complete assignments as usual, although we can fill in a few forms for extensions. It may be easy for 21-year-olds with no other commitments, but for those of us with families who were walking a tight line anyway, things have really tipped over. I am finding this really quite frustrating and I know others are too. Having had a burnout at the beginning of last year, I am reluctant to push myself over that edge again, so, in the theme of acceptance, I carry on doing what I can, hoping someone will allow the extensions I need and the postgraduate course will have some leeway.

As a blended family, my older children are not seeing their dad and my stepdaughter isn't visiting. We

have made this decision as a whole family to help to protect us all as much as we can. So, we have video calls and the older ones play online games with their dad. My stepdaughter and our younger child seem to play with each other remotely, which is nice to watch, but their attention spans are limited. I have also found an interesting thing, which is that when I'm sitting in my living room, relaxing on an evening, and my ex's voice comes booming in and I can hear his little nuances, it jolts me into a 'what the f are you doing here?' reaction. But then I realise he isn't actually here. We do have a good relationship now and it's good to see the blended family working well.

We have also had a death in the family due to the pandemic. My grandad wasn't the healthiest anyway but he was definitely a fighter. As a family we have been unable to gather together to do the simple things families do when a member dies. The funeral had about 10 of us, we all had to stay at a distance and it was very quick. Driving home from the crematorium felt very odd; something doesn't feel complete. I know my family feel similar. So, even grieving is on hold.

Life does feel a little bit on hold for me. Usual work is on hold, we've got projects on hold and funding applications. But I have to wonder if things will ever be back to usual? I'm not sure they will. This is a change and returning back to something, I doubt, will be back to how things were. Do we even want things to turn back to how things were? I think I'd quite like to take on some of the good things of being forced to be at home. We are all in a place of uncertainty and change right now. As a wife, mother, doula, counsellor, manager, daughter, sister, it's easy to get lost in the busy moments that are life. One thing which I will take from this is that slowing down is OK. Taking time is OK, and I and others can adapt, even if that takes time.