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Six go Cocooning

“Age is just a number” a familiar quote used by many including Joan Collins who suggested that; “age is just a number, unless you’re a good wine.” However, where the Corona virus is concerned the age 70 is when you must stay home and avoid human contact! This is far from ideal and does not correlate to the concepts of successful ageing. In fact, the cure in this case may be worse than the disease.

One 70-year-old recently told me *“that Cocooning is a blunt instrument and should not be applied to all over 70s, nobody asked us, and the negative impact is not being considered.”* As a researcher, currently ‘exploring the motivations of older outdoor adventurers in Ireland’ and my own experience of trekking, scuba diving and of ‘older’ sea swimmers, I had to agree with my Cocooning friend. All of the over 70s that I have observed through my research are fitter and healthier than many of the younger people I know. Their passion and interest in their leisure activity is a driving force for them to maintain health, fitness and social engagement.



I couldn't help wonder on what basis was this blunt instrument put in place? Perhaps it was based on the misinformed notion that older people are a homogeneous group? Like any group in society, older people are not a homogenous group. The concept of cocooning, while intended to protect a specific group, flies in the face of decades of research which tells us that quality of life as one ages is based on remaining socially engaged, physically fit, mentally active, positive and contributing within one's community. There is no question that 'Cocooning', while undoubtedly well-intentioned, has resulted in upset, concern and indignation amongst 'older people' and their advocates.

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Cocooning – what is it, why do it and issues it raises

Initially coined in 1981 by author Faith Popcorn, she suggested that rather than a fad Cocooning would become a trend. Cocooning, in this context, ultimately means being asked to stay within the confines of your home and remain socially distanced, insulated from perceived danger. Cocooning then, may be considered as the creation of a ‘shell of safety’ based on perceived fears of the outside world. Currently, Cocooning is based on the premise that those 70 and over, or those with underlying medical conditions, are at greater risk of severe outcomes through contracting COVID 19.

The HSE (Health Service Executive) has indicated that people over 70 “are strongly advised to stay at home and avoid any face-to-face contact.” There are other guidelines all designed to protect the “vulnerable.” However, this suggestion and the language to communicate it has been perceived as a dictate and strikes fear into many older people, specifically those over 70. It raises issues of ageism and the negative perception of the ageing demographic. For others, the language itself is disempowering and older people and their advocates’ suggest that the fate of ‘older people’ is chosen based on innate ageist presumptions and that they themselves are left out of the discussion.



In a Seán O’Rourke Radio 1 interview on May 6th Paul Connelly (CEO of Age Action Ireland), Inez Bailey (CEO of National Adult Literacy (NALA)), and Charlie Bird (Irish Journalist and broadcaster) were in broad agreement on the issues raised in the context of Cocooning. The general consensus was that the language, the absence of older people in the conversation, and public perceptions around cocooning for the ageing demographic in general need further debate. This is especially the case if, as is predicted, there are more such pandemics. It was clear from this interview that ageism predates COVID 19.

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In addition, it was suggested that the over 70s were misled i.e. many thought the guidance was actually a legal requirement and that instilling fear may have been the approach adopted in order to ensure compliance.

While protecting people is important, one could question the efficacy of doing this by instilling fear. The following are the views of six Cocooners on the concept of cocooning and its implications.

Six Discuss their Cocooning Adventure

While accepting of the good intentions and the need to manage the spread of the virus, all six were consistent in their views about the negative impact in the long term. Consequently, there were those that complied fully or partially, those that did not and those that did it their way, in their own words “rebels.” Out of the six, two complied somewhat fully though reluctantly, one managed four hours, another two weeks and one did it “their way.” This group, albeit small, corroborates heterogeneity in ageing. The reality is that only one of the six actually conformed fully to the cocooning suggestions. What was consistent among all was the confusion re Cocooning being a legislative requirement, the negative outcomes, the fear, and the worry that ageism is systemic. For four of the six ageism exists at a high level in Ireland.



Question one asked our six adventurers about their views on cocooning? Pat, suggested “ill-conceived, condescending and patronising.” Pat further suggested that it was not right to “equate age with disease.”

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Caragh, without hesitation stated; “I thought the whole thing was incredibly ageist and condescending.” Caragh, an enthusiastic dog owner is very active in her community and engages in river and park clean ups winter and summer. She was incensed at the notion of being told that “she was too old and decrepit to even leave the confines of her own house.” Geale however, took an opposing view and suggested that “the word was quite well chosen” and that we would; “like the butterfly go forward in a new form of life.”



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Interestingly, Graham, took a different perspective and suggested he had “no issue with the word initially but as he listened to how it was used he found it to be condescending to the over 70s.” He argued, cocooning is not what we are doing; as we will “not emerge stronger, in fact, we will likely emerge with serious physical and mental health issues.” On this basis Graham described himself as a “bit of a rebel” informing me that he cocooned “his own way.” Ultimately, he maintained social distance, washed his hands and walked when there were relatively few people in his favourite walking spot.

Jim number 1 was: “scared when it happened, I hated not getting out, missed my friends and staying in every day I got very bored and put on a lot of weight.” Jim number 2 was: “not too pleased about it, it was more like a prison sentence” and decided after two weeks, with his doctor’s blessing, that he wasn’t going to continue with it.

All six expressed their concern at the negative outcomes for those that felt compelled to cocoon. They all provided examples of friends, or colleagues that now had mobility, weight, physical or mental health issues as a result of cocooning.

The interpretation of the initial call to cocoon was thought to be a directive rather than a suggestion. In general, most of the six felt that fear was used to get the message across. The lack of consideration of the voice of 70 year olds and over was a concern for some of the six. The issue of ageism was also a concern with one of the six suggesting that “this is ageism at its most blatant” and that the action will provoke “a negative reaction towards ageism.” Another argued that while many discrimination battles have been fought “the battle against ageism has not been fought.” One respondent was concerned that the battle against ageism would never be won as “ageism has always existed, but when you get into governmental, social ageism that the problem arises.” When asked the direct question regarding the tone being ageist? Jim number 2 suggested “without a shadow of a doubt.”

On the long term impact, all six concurred that there will be a seriously negative impact. In particular, those who were fit and well, capable of being responsible and complying with the regulations suggested for other members of the population.

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Conclusion

A snapshot in time of six Cocooners, each one considered cocooning carefully and made their respective decisions based on their understanding, their health, circumstantial and functional abilities. All six value exercise in natural environments, social engagement and the benefits to their quality of life from physical activity.

The diversity in older people is clearly evident in the views of this group of would-be Cocooners. It is also clear that the number 70 or any other number should not be the defining factor to restrict activity. If this teaches us anything it is that ageism is a reality and we must change that perspective. Perhaps, functional ability and health might be an important consideration in any future Cocooning suggestions. Certainly, we need to present our ageing demographic in a more positive way than during this COVID epidemic and include them in any future conversations.

