

National Victoria [Coronavirus pandemic](#)

OPINION

Living in limbo: the particular trauma of being a Victorian right now



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When my Twitter feed was updated with Victorian cases yesterday, my body had a very instant reaction. Prickly sweat dotted my skin, my heart rate went up and I found it difficult to breathe.

No restrictions had been announced at that stage. I hadn't been to any tier-1 sites. There was no action to be taken on my behalf. But my body instantly snapped into fight or flight mode. It knew what was coming.

Now, as we head into Lockdown 5.0, it's not overstating it to say that we are traumatised, in the literal sense.



Long lines of people wait to get their COVID-19 test in Melbourne. CHRIS HOPKINS

Even before this latest outbreak, when we could still send our children to school and head into work and sit in a cafe, our bodies were very much carrying the memory of what it felt like to be separated from our families, to attend funerals on Zoom, and be locked in our homes with a curfew and five-kilometre travel radius. Not just carrying the memory, actually, but still there, living that life.

As psychiatrist and trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk says in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, “trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body”. This imprint means that how we manage the present is forever changed. Because it’s still there, in our bodies.

When there is a threat, adrenaline is released to help us fight back or flee. When the threat subsides, our stress hormones dissipate and our bodies return to normal functioning. But what if we’re not able to return to that baseline level of “normal”?

This is why, even when we have doughnut days or open borders, or we’re dancing at a wedding, we’re still living with the threat of what *could* be. And when we have constantly elevated stress hormones, we aren’t able to function properly. We experience issues with memory, attention, sleep.



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When explaining the exhaustion of flashbacks in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder, Van der Kolk says: "If elements of the trauma are replayed again and again, the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories ever more deeply in the mind. Ordinary day-to-day events become less and less compelling ... It becomes harder and harder to feel the joys and aggravations of ordinary life."

So, as restrictions are announced and the COVID-19 landscape changes yet again, we're not just dealing with the danger at hand; we're also dealing with all those past traumas. The triggering is very real.

When danger arises, we are meant to mobilise, take action, and then return to a sense of security. But we are now living in a state of perpetual fight or flight, and we are not designed for this. Our stress hormones have been pumping for 18 months, but they aren't able to do the thing – Mobilise! Take action! – that gets results. When we feel the reward of being able to take actions to defend ourselves, we have a sense of agency.

But in this case, we are being asked to perpetually defend ourselves from danger, without relief. We do what needs to be done, we rally, but the threat is forever looming. And the repeated lockdowns just reinforce this sense that the danger has not passed. We exist forever in limbo.



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In May, I sat outside the Arts Centre on a freezing Melbourne night with my best friend. Under a blood moon, we drank red wine, knowing that the immersive dance performance we were about to see for Melbourne's RISING festival was probably its last. Lockdown 4.0 had not yet been announced, but we could feel it in our bones.

Pendulum, the performance we were lucky enough to see, involved suspended bells, each pulsing and buzzing and humming in unison with the dancers' movements. Its aim was to showcase the human body in a state of flux. It was hypnotic; the sound of the bells echoing through the NGV, reverberating off the walls. The dancers moved and dodged and braced and dipped, as each bell swung and swooped.

And here we are again, all doing these choreographed dances, as we hear the sounds reverberating off the walls and our bodies look for movement. We brace. We dip and dive, beholden to factors outside our control.

Natasha Sholl is a writer and former lawyer living in Melbourne. Her book about grief and trauma will be released by Ultimo Press in February.