



INTERVIEW

Corona - Conflicts as Chances?

The dispute over opinions has reached the private sphere and is dividing even close friends. What is the way out of the crisis? Fortunately, there is an alternative to dogmatism - if we learn to engage in conversation in a new way.

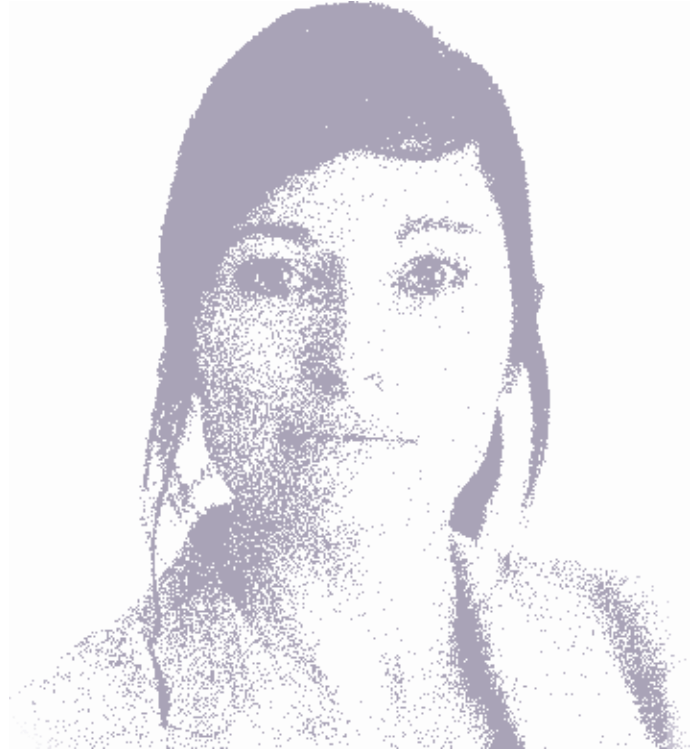
The year and a half of on-off lockdown has not only put a strain on our nerves, but also on our relationships.

Some people are afraid of ever new waves with ever new variations, others find it terrible how people let themselves be driven crazy by "fear-driven politics".

Will the pandemic become a stress test for friendships? Yes, indeed, as communication scientist and mediator Dr Andrea Hartmann-Piraudeau has observed. But she also says: "This is a good thing. Because if we do it right, we can learn from the pandemic period - in the social debate as well as in the personal sphere - the dispute about the strategies for coping with the Corona crisis and to deal with conflicts that will continue to arise in the future from opposing opinions about the right course of action.

Dr Hartmann-Piraudeau, some people are already talking about social division as a result of the pandemic. Is that how you perceive it?

Dr Andrea Hartmann-Piraudeau: The atmosphere is tense, that's true. You can observe that camps are forming. The two poles are roughly where some emphasise that their actions are based on scientific facts, where they say: the virus is dangerous in such and such a way and must be curbed in such and such a way. And then there are those who find it short-sighted to refer only to the virus. They see the crisis as something bigger and criticise the current coping patterns as being too short-sighted.



Dr Andrea Hartmann-Piraudeau

The communication scientist and mediator supports people and organisations in clarifying their conflicts. She offers mediator training and is the managing director of the Stuttgart-based company Consensus for Conflict Resolution and Dialogue.



Firefighters versus wide thinkers, that seems to be a pattern in this pandemic. Why is this a problem?

Thinking in such categories blocks creative approaches to solutions. According to the motto: I have recognised the real reason for the crisis, your petty talk about incidences and R-values doesn't help. Or, on the other hand: Why are we talking about wildlife markets in China? The problem is here! - There is a fine line between the world of facts and the world of interpretations. Everything is quickly coloured by individual views, which are, however, not marked as such. When we pretend to have found the truth, we imply that the other person is blind and ignorant.

In fact, pandemics are said to be favoured by, among other things, dwindling biodiversity and factory farming

Corona ultimately touches on the question of how we basically want to eat, live and travel - I think we all feel that. But that doesn't make concrete everyday considerations any less relevant. In relation to a current event, it can be an escape to move too globally in thought. In the medium term, it can be just as problematic to only want to fight a symptom.

Take the example of school closures. Some are in favour, to protect the health of all and meanwhile also the children themselves.

The others counter: Maybe, but children who cannot go to school suffer and, in the worst case, become mentally ill. Both arguments are understandable. And yet they seem miles apart and thus incompatible.

Because it is far too easy to get down to the level of weighing one against the other: one suffering against the other. In my opinion, this is how many discussions have gone recently, and this is how they continue in part: What is more serious, what is less bad? What is better, what is worse, what is morally more justifiable? Without realising it, we quickly become hardened. Only one or the other

is justified. This is not the way to deal with crises constructively.

What would be helpful instead?

Turn the topic in as many directions as possible and look at it again and again - above all, first of all, without judging. As a rule, a certain tension arises when we justify several things at the same time, at least for the moment: the emotional distress of the children in the lockdown, to stay with the example, and the increased protection through the closure of the schools. But it is precisely this tension that holds potential for sometimes surprising solutions. In my work as a mediator, I experience day after day how the creative play with different aspects makes a forward-looking approach to change possible. But you don't come up with such ideas through communication patterns as we have experienced them in the past: Team caution versus team *laissez faire*. We have to fear something similar for the near future. If one side pretends that this pandemic is over. And the other says: here at home, perhaps, but worldwide the crisis continues to simmer. In fact, these are also considerations that cannot be dismissed out of hand.

And yet they are of no use?

No one can save the world for a moment. What works comparatively well, however, is to dare to change one's perspective, i.e. to see the other person's view of the world. Then we no longer talk about positions, but about interests: 'I have experienced in my own environment how people have fallen ill with Corona. I have a previous illness and was worried about infection all the time', and so on. The other person's statements then no longer seem sharp, but flexible - even if we continue to disagree with them on the matter.

The fronts seem to be particularly hardened at the moment on the subject of vaccination. What is going wrong there? The classic: people talk about positions, not about the needs behind them. "I'm getting vaccinated because at the moment, after a▶▶



Friendship is not only about affirmation, but also about enduring the uncomfortable.

it seems to be a reasonable action when I weigh it up' - that sounds quite different from: 'You just have to go through with it now.'

How could vaccination sceptics and supporters enter into conversation?

By first realising that the human brain finds it difficult to switch back and forth too much. It prefers to make up its mind and then stick to it. Vaccinated people tend to click away information when they read about possible side effects of vaccines. On the other hand, the vaccination sceptics have also built up and strengthened their position. Such convictions are sometimes set in stone.

And what happens next?

Those who are aware of the fundamental need for consensus are more likely to question their own absolute truths, to take a step back now and then. The vaccination advocate, for example, reveals that he was not entirely sure about the injection. But even those who don't want to be vaccinated can contribute to a constructive exchange if they put their concrete concerns into words instead of just saying "never vaccinate". If we concede that the other person has thought about it and made his or her decisions on this basis, we are one step further - in valuing. Whoever appreciates, at least listens. This is a chance for rapprochement.

Can it sometimes be necessary to renounce a friendship if certain hurdles seem insurmountable?

That would be a pity - also for the individual, who is dependent on stimulating impulses. To break off friendships that challenge us to deal with the pressing issues of our time is to deprive ourselves of opportunities for development. What is

Friendship? Space for encounter and exchange? Or space for affirmation? Corona is not only a break, but also an opportunity. If we don't temporarily turn our backs on our friend because the conversations are uncomfortable, something can open up. A space that at best expands, that diffuses from friendship perhaps into a group and then into society.

And what if the other side simply remains stubborn?

As a mediator, I always encourage people to enter into disputes consciously - but I also say: drawing boundaries is okay. How much can I endure, how much can I bear? Ultimately, everyone has to decide for themselves. That means that the limits lie primarily with us, not with the other person. Making this clear to oneself can relieve the pressure. The must becomes a can, a possibility. Corona is often said to be like a burning glass. I would rather say: under the magnifying glass we can learn. We can try things out and discover competences, especially those that we will probably need more often in the long run.

You think that this will happen more often in the future: Conclusions from crises that run in completely different directions and divide?

We must consciously take countermeasures, and do so as a community whose desire to find solutions is greater than its desire to be right. Whether it's the pandemic, the refugee crisis or the climate, putting ourselves on a moral pedestal and looking down on those who are supposedly doing worse doesn't get us anywhere. Take, for example, the entrepreneur whose company produces sustainably and does so worldwide.

To push my idea, I have to fly', I heard her say at a congress. And that she had a hard time finding a good balance here. Doesn't sound like a clear answer? It does. But maybe that is also an important point: that we are patient. And to be forgiving, with ourselves as well as with others. After many years as a conflict researcher, I am convinced that crises are fields of growth. At least they can be.

/The interview was conducted by Elisabeth Hussendörfer