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DERYA GÜRER

Geologist Derya Gürer in the remote Anatolian Plateau in Turkey.

VOYAGES OF SELF-DISCOVERY

Scientists explain how fieldwork in remote areas prepared them for a pandemic. **By Carrie Arnold**

As many parts of the world continue with or reimpose coronavirus lockdowns, scientists – like everyone else – are feeling the effects of cabin fever. But long stretches of fieldwork in remote areas and months of working at sea have left some researchers more prepared than others. Geologist Derya Gürer at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, says that her experiences during such trips have taught her how to cope with the circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

She and four other researchers who shared their fieldwork experiences with *Nature* offered the same advice: cut yourself and everyone else some slack. “People

might be struggling with something that you are unaware of,” says marine biologist Joana Xavier at the University of Porto in Portugal. “It’s very important just to be kind.”

DERYA GÜRER CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN

I returned to land in early March after spending 59 days on my first research cruise to map the sea floor in the Southern Ocean, and I’ve been in self-quarantine ever since. I have also spent time in remote, mountainous regions, usually for several months at a time, as a field geologist.

On this year’s voyage, we had one big storm. You’re on this huge vessel and you have to trust the people who are guiding it. We were watching a very skilled crew stabilizing the ship. It didn’t make the storm go away, but I focused on positive things and on what was within my control. That made me look at my worries in a different way, almost like an outsider. This approach has been helpful while in quarantine.

I started regularly practising yoga on the ship, and, since then, I’ve done it almost daily. It has helped me to focus and to control my emotions, and to re-evaluate how I am doing every day.

During the entire two months I was on board, I watched only one film. I just kept busy. I’ve been doing the same thing while in isolation because of the coronavirus. Many of us are still being told to stay in, and we know people are facing hardship and are losing their jobs or their lives, but the one thing that I know I can control is my thoughts.

We have no direct control over what’s happening in the world, what governments decide or what rules are imposed. I think it is important to remember that this is not going to be forever. As a scientist, I try to observe what’s going on with a bit of curiosity, as well

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as to observe my own thoughts and emotions without judgement.

Derya Güreer is a geologist at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

LAURA OMDAHL **THINK ABOUT OTHERS**

I worked for five seasons – from August to February – at McMurdo Station in Antarctica, between 2007 and 2012. I started as the beverage supply clerk and ended up supervising the stores at all three US bases.

At the McMurdo store, we got one shipment per year, usually from a resupply ship that came in January or February, so we had to make everything last for the rest of the year. At McMurdo, all meals are free in the galley. So everything in the store was junk food and fizzy drinks, souvenirs, extra toiletries, that kind of thing.

Doritos are the most sought-after treats down there. Everyone loves Doritos. So I had to put limits on them. Someone would want an entire case and I would say, ‘I’m sorry, you can have two to three bags a day.’ People just don’t want to think, ‘Okay, so if I eat all the Doritos now, I won’t have any in January. Or, if someone else eats all the Doritos, I won’t have any. Oh, so maybe we should share?’ I tried to pick things people liked, but obviously we couldn’t get everything. I’d see people when they first got there. They’d be mad that I didn’t have their preferred brand of toothpaste.

When you leave the ice, it’s amazing. You go to New Zealand, and it has wonderful produce. The first time you go into a market, it feels fantastic, because you’re thinking, ‘Oh my God, an avocado. Look at that salad. Look at all the fruit, those strawberries.’ I still feel that way every time I go into a grocery shop. It hasn’t left me – even now, with the shelves stripped of many goods. Why are people complaining? I can get a can of tomatoes. It might not be the exact can of tomatoes I was looking for, but there are some, and we have tons of food to eat.

Laura Omdahl is a former store supervisor at the US Antarctic Program, Antarctica.

CHRIS TURNEY **KEEP A POSITIVE OUTLOOK**

It’s important not to beat yourself up if you don’t achieve as much as you’d like. As part of my research group’s work on developing highly detailed records of past environmental conditions preserved in tree rings, ice cores and sequences of peat and lake sediment, I’ve

spent time in the Antarctic. We talk about the A-factor, which is short for Antarctic factor.

If anything can go wrong, it will. COVID-19 is the extreme version of the A-factor. And we all have families and other commitments outside work. So accept that not everything you have planned will happen. And if you can’t work as much as you’d like to, that’s all right. Almost everyone in the research community is in the same position and it’s more important to keep a positive mindset and look out for everyone else than to disappear into a frenzy of work.

On a research field trip, keeping focused on getting everyone home safely is a powerful motivator. And this means looking to the future. A positive outlook is crucial in this regard. I’ve seen people reflect too much on their predicament, which distracts them from finding a solution. You don’t want people withdrawing into themselves, especially if it affects anyone else. Keep regular communication open and make sure team members are working together for the future. Even if you can’t find a solution, preparing for whatever comes next and beyond helps people’s mental health enormously.

We’re social animals and need contact. Social distancing might mean we have to keep a physical distance from one another, but we can use technology to keep the lines of communication open with family, friends and colleagues. Mix it up and you’ll stay sane and achieve more in the long term.

Chris Turney is a geoscientist and explorer at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

JOANA XAVIER **MAINTAIN A ROUTINE**

We’ve been in quarantine since early March, and my partner and I think that it’s important to keep a routine. I learnt about the importance of doing so when I started joining research cruises in 2010 as part of my work on marine sponges. The cruises involved relatively large vessels travelling across the North Atlantic, in the Nordic seas and across the Arctic mid-ocean ridge.

On board, we worked in shifts, usually 12 hours on, 12 hours off. We always had a routine. Not only did that help us to work efficiently in a small, confined space, but it also helped us to unwind when our work was finished. Whether it was a film night or a quiet cup of coffee first thing in the morning, the rituals kept us anchored while we were at sea. When we began to self-isolate after coronavirus struck, I used the same strategy without even thinking about it.

From the first week, because we realized the lockdown was going to last much longer than

we originally expected, we created a schedule with our children, who are five and seven. We agreed that the routine needed to include everything from playtime to study time, arts and crafts, and home tasks such as cooking and cleaning up. We asked the children if they thought the timetable would work for them and we put everyone’s schedule up on the living-room wall. We try to stick to it as much as possible, because this also allows me to work from home.

It is working quite well. We make sure we get enough rest – our moods depend a lot on that. Managing our energy is important. I learnt this on board and it’s true now at home: we need our resting time and our fun time.

Joana Xavier is a marine biologist at the University of Porto, Portugal.

RACHEL DOWNEY **STEP AWAY FROM WORK**

I did my first research cruise as a physical geographer in 2013 as part of the British Antarctic Survey, and I’ve done three more since then. The longest was for seven weeks.

One of the most important things I’ve learnt is that you need to take the time to understand your needs – both work and personal. I have to know when to put the lid on, when to stop working. On some ships, we would finish our shift and all have a drink, just to separate the day. The ship was our place of work and we never got to leave it, but the ritual marked the end of work and then we could play darts or games. We had things like film nights to look forward to. We found ways to make the ship work for work and for play.

Now that I’m at home, I’m really thankful that we live next to a bush reserve and that we have a garden. It’s so nice to get out there after work, with all the soil and the plants. My partner is learning to play the guitar through YouTube. It’s so easy for both of us to just keep working, but I’ve learnt to make myself stop. I try to keep an office space for work in the dining room and then walk away.

This is an unprecedented time, and it’s easy to be hard on each other and ourselves and say, ‘Oh, I must work twice as hard, or so many hours, or I must achieve this.’ You see all these memes about all the incredible things scientists did during the Black Death. I think it’s a good time for us to sit back and reflect on our work, and to look at where we are and what direction we want to go in.

Rachel Downey is a marine biologist at the Australian National University, Canberra.

Interviews by Carrie Arnold. Interviews have been edited for length and clarity.