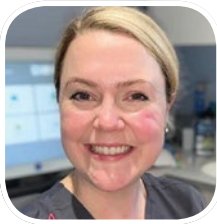


# 'The unknown is frightening'



**Michelle Vinter, 38,** is a dental hygienist and the

registered manager and owner of a private dental practice in Southampton. At the time of writing, Michelle is in lockdown with her family.

## New routine

I live with my partner in Southampton. I have two children of my own, a four-year-old girl and a nine-year-old boy, and two stepchildren, one of whom is currently living with us.

On weekdays the children have cereals and a big bowl of fruit for breakfast; we have been eating healthier than usual as we have time to really think about eating. At the weekend we have kept to our traditional bacon and egg!

In the mornings after breakfast we try and do some form of exercise, usually some stretches and a little yoga. I often do a workout (I have a new love for Jane Fonda workouts!) whilst I settle the children down for some work.

## The business

I am a qualified dental hygienist and I am a registered manager and owner of a private dental practice in Southampton with my business partner Melanie Pittroff, a dentist. I bought the practice three years ago from my then-boss and I have put my heart and soul into it.

The practice had two surgery rooms. I have modernised it and redone every room in the building, and I have plans to do a fourth surgery this year.

I have been at my current practice since I was 16-years-old, starting out as a dental nurse working in a busy NHS environment. I left this practice to go to university and then returned to the same practice afterwards. Now we offer general and cosmetic dentistry, Invisalign, facial aesthetics and private payment schemes.

We had transferred our business from being a partnership to a limited company from 1 April so a lot of work went into that. The move is a bit like starting all over again; it's almost like shutting your business down then reopening it again in a different name. You have to let anyone and everyone know this is what you are doing; it is hard work.

As I am the owner of the practice, I am not being furloughed during the pandemic, but we have furloughed most staff. Most days we have our 'Cobra meetings' on FaceTime and my business partner and I speak daily on the phone. We have to catch up with the staff as well to make sure they are staying sane and are happy.

As we are not able to open the practice, we have worked hard to stay in contact with our patients.

## Average day

My average day can consist of anything! We have a busy household with my children and an 18-year-old who misses her boyfriend terribly. When we knew lockdown was happening, we managed to write down a structure that suited us all, which included routine, meals/menus for the week, house rules and a tick chart for the children. We have followed this slightly; it was just useful to have a guide. I also bought a chalk board to go up on the wall, so we could use this for teaching. We got all the school books, paper and stationery and we arranged it in our dresser board, for easy access.

We are very lucky as in our dining room we have converted half of it into a music room, which consists of a drum kit, piano, guitars and a microphone. Recently we have had talent contests and a general get together playing instruments. Usually my four-year-old is the dancer!

We have cookery classes for the children which has included sausage roll making, cakes, Indian and Italian cooking.

After lunch we often sit out in the garden and do some artwork. We have been drawing all the different flowers in the garden; we have also been growing our own vegetables and are watching our seeds grow.

### Getting creative

In the Easter holidays we made all our own cards for the family and for neighbours. My children often put little notes through the neighbours' doors to check that they are well and if they need anything. We got out the paddling pool and all got in. We have also had great fun getting each other very wet with the hosepipe!

Where we live, we have a beautiful sports centre very near and we also have woods, so we often go out walking. The children have bikes so we go out biking too. We sometimes do an extra-long walk to the shop through the sports centre to get our daily exercise in.

I have been very organised with our food, I managed to get quite a lot of supplies in before lockdown as I was very concerned when I was watching the news. I knew lockdown would happen to us in the UK as it has with Italy and other countries.

Every two weeks I go to a big supermarket and buy my supplies and other items. I try to use the local butchers and greengrocers, as I am conscious of keeping local businesses in work.

I cook every evening; sometimes twice as I need to feed the children first and like to have my meal later and relax with a glass of wine.

### Staying in touch

My parents live five doors up from my house and they are superb cooks! I often have meals brought down for me and left in my porch. My parents have always done this as I lead a stressful life and they look after me well. We look after each other and if either one of us goes to the shop we will ask each other if we need anything.

Evenings are taken up with calming the children down and trying to get them to bed; it can be tricky with the lighter evenings. Some evenings I just want the day to end so that I can get into bed and try to sleep and block out all my problems. The main worry for me is the future of my existing business; being so new in the business it is so scary. We were just reaping the seeds that we had sown, then COVID-19 came along.

The day we shut the business I cried all day as we are in such uncertain times and the unknown is frightening. I am exhausted worrying about it so I try and think positively. At least we have our health.

Our family life has had its ups and downs but we have remained strong. We have had tears and upset.

My nine-year-old son lives with me and often sees his Dad at the weekends. I did make a decision to keep him with me whilst lockdown was in place and he agreed. However, he has

been very anxious and had sleepless nights as he misses his Dad so much. When he asked to go to his Dad's I had to tell him he could potentially spread the virus, but he got very upset and said he would rather have COVID-19 than not see his Dad.

The law clearly states that children can go between parents but I wasn't sure how I felt about this. After three weeks of not seeing his Dad my son stayed with him for five days, then phoned saying that he wanted to come home.

The other scenario is my eldest stepdaughter, who feels lonely. She is at university, living in a shared house. All the students left the house apart from one friend and my stepdaughter decided to stay with her. However, she is now desperate to see the family, but she is a key worker and we have had to say no to her coming to visit. It is a very difficult situation.

### Celebrations

My partner and I were meant to be getting married this year. I organised a civil ceremony wedding in a beautiful Tudor building and then the wedding breakfast at our local golf club with family arriving later, but we have had to cancel this as we do not feel it is right to celebrate this year.

and memes have been sent back and forth between friends and family group chats to cheer each another up.

### Finding calm

Before we stopped work I was very emotionally stressed and I was having a lot of heart palpitations. I was running the business; working as a hygienist; had just done the third surgery up and manned that along the way; we were organising and planning work to start on the fourth surgery; we had a small NHS contract which we planned to stop this year also and on top of that becoming a limited company. I felt that I needed a break and I had not been spending as much time with the children. I felt the business was coming before the family and that was never my intention. I needed to breathe!

When I finally closed the practice I was a bit relieved as I now finally had the time with my family that I had been yearning. Lockdown has certainly made me stop and think about what it is that is important. I have had no heart palpitations since being off work, no IBS symptoms or back pain from the stress and tension. I have been able to sit and play with my children, laugh and have fun without

*'Nothing beats the smile on a patient's face when they have improved their oral hygiene, their smile and confidence!'*

Our relationship has been tense as we are not used to being with each other all the time. I love my partner very much and we still feel that we would like to celebrate our love and our children would still like to see us get married, so we are having a hand fasting ceremony in the garden. It is a type of 'Celtic' wedding where we bind our hands together with ribbon, I feel like it will be romantic and the children will love a celebration!

I have tried to stay in touch with my wider family. I have a large family and I am very involved in all their lives. We have missed them so much; we have written letters and poems and drawn pictures to send them. The main communication is via FaceTime; I feel that we need to see each other and feel more connected now than ever before. With certain groups of friends and family, we have done quizzes, talked and sent pictures of daily life. My family have also created music videos to send them! Jokes

being a major stress head. I have loved being the housewife/stay at home mum which I have never been as I'm always so busy, although I have had times when I have desperately missed my workplace, staff and patients.

The one thing I have missed at work the most is making people smile again. I know I make my children smile but nothing beats the smile on a patient's face when they have improved their oral hygiene, their smile and confidence! It's one of the best feelings. At work we have a smile wall with some of our success stories. If I've had a bad morning, I will look at these and the smiles just cheer me up straight away.

The one thing I will look forward to when lockdown is over is having a hug with my Mum and having a meal with all the family together. I am also going to have a big party, invite friends and family around and just celebrate life!

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