

I first remember hearing about COVID-19 in the Fall of 2019 through international news channels that I watch. With my mother having no immune system, I remember being alarmed about this virus that was developing in Wuhan, China, and knew it would be only a matter of time before it arrived on the shores of the US. I would watch any stories I could find in English to get as much information as I could, and by the time it did arrive in the US, I was much more informed about this virus than many of our leaders were. This surprised me, as I thought surely, they have been monitoring this situation and getting information that I have not had access to.

When the virus did finally arrive in March 2020, you could tell who was consuming which media outlets how they were reacting to the virus. People who were getting information from stations like, ABC, CBS, CNN, etc, were concerned. They were asking to stay home, if not mandated to do so, and wearing masks and implementing the social distancing policies. People who were watching stations such as Fox or getting their information of Facebook were getting angry at the public's "overaction", saying you can't shut down the economy over the flu. Even as the virus's spread increased and people were dying, I remember people who followed these networks digging their heels in, with the Lt. Governor of Texas saying something like "the old people have had their run, we need to take a risk so the young people can stay at work."

While my family has been fortunate enough to so far make it through this pandemic without suffering the loss of a loved one, the fear never goes away. Fear is a general emotion that everyone was feeling during this time. Fear that any sneeze or cough could be an exposure to the virus. That we would then be taking that home to our families, potentially making them ill. The phrase "You got the rona?" became an early joke while also in a way, like a friendly warning to say, "I don't like how you sound, keep away from me".

This fear was amplified in our house. Knowing that any potential exposure could be a death sentence for my mother, we were always walking on egg shells. It did not make it any easier having two first responders in the family, who were nearly always exposed to the virus: one working as a firefighter, the other as a dispatcher. Early on, when so little was known about COVID, I remember my mom being sick and the doctors believing she has covid. As a first responder, I broke down in tears believing I had brought it home to her, believing that I had given the disease to my mother that would probably be the death of her. That fear has never gone away. Any little cough, and we would be afraid that COVID has arrived into the household. In order to ensure that we did not expose her unnecessarily, making sacrifices that were very

painful. We cancelled our 2020 holiday plans because the cases were increasing rapidly and my brother, who had been locked in his apartment for months, would have to fly home. We cancelled trips, didn't hang out together, and if we did see her, we wore masks and notified her if we were having a COVID symptom.

Even after the vaccines were out, and we had been vaccinated, the fear didn't go away. And there was good reason for that. Misinformation and this campaign against a perfectly safe vaccine that would prevent this virus from spreading was going around faster than the virus. The government already knew that we would not hit the population percentage need to hit herd immunity, and with that COVID viruses would continue to mutate, and we would see vaccine resistant strains at some point. Public places started to not require masks for the vaccination, but required no proof, so everyone was not wearing masks, regardless of status. You had no clue who was or was not vaccination, and as a result, people who were sick were spreading it because they were not protected. When my grandmother died in August 2021, her cousin and his wife attended her funeral knowing they were COVID positive and did not wear a mask. Almost everyone who was at that funeral came down with COVID or RSV (a close COVID relative), except my cousin (who is a dentist), my father (the fireman), and myself (the dispatcher). My mother, who we have been terrified would get COVID, was fortunate to get RSV. I say fortunate because she is still alive with us today, despite all the damage the RSV has done. She was in the hospital for over a week, surrounded by COVID patients who were dying around her. My father was on the verge of a mental health crisis himself. He was busy trying to reach the cousins on the phone, to what purpose who knows, he was screaming about how could they have done that, and he was worried about my brother (who he thought was hiding the fact he was about to be fired from him even though my brother was just having a bad day). In the end, despite her inability to breathe, her difficulty in walking, and her struggle to function, the hospital and her doctors determined she would be safer at home, away from the COVID patients. It has been nearly a year, and we are not sure she has completely recovered from the ordeal.

Now as we reach a new round of COVID variants, people, including our family, are in this weird limbo space. They are still fearful, but they acknowledge that this is going to be apart of our lives. Despite all the advances science has made with this virus, you can still tell who is receiving their news from which sources. As a dispatcher, many of the officers I work with are Republicans and consume right-leaning media sources, and I have heard more misinformation

than I can to recite pertaining to the virus. They had quit spreading it so much since an officer lost his mother, and nearly his father, to the virus last year. Hearing this misinformation keeps me fearful because I know I am surrounded by people who are not taking the proper precautions, despite the knowledge they have about my mother. While the world is returning to normal, and I have returned to as many normal things as I can, I am always cautious, particularly at work. I carry a mask at all times, I keep my distance, and if any of them sound sick, I still ask “You have the rona?” but not as a joke, as a friendly warning to stay away from me. And while it doesn’t look like COVID is going away, I’m hoping for a day when we can breathe without being afraid of it, for my mother’s sake.