

My COVID-19 Story

By Samantha Ashby

As we hit the one-year mark of the pandemic in the US, I am just starting to process all of the emotions from last year. It was such a tough year. As the mom of a toddler, the wife of a doctor (who treated COVID patients), and a frontline-ish worker (public librarian), I spent much of 2020 and 2021 (so far) in survival mode.

When most states shut down one year ago, I was hopeful that it would help buy the US some time to get better treatments for COVID, slow the spread, develop new treatments, etc., but as the wife of a physician closely following what was happening in China and then Italy, I had no illusions that the pandemic would be over quickly. Right away, my husband and I assumed that “normal life” would not return for at least a year. Of course, as everything shut down, my husband kept working, and we started to worry about when the surge would hit Marquette, the small city in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where we live.

Shortly after the pandemic started, we started preparing for him to live somewhere else (an Airbnb, camper or hotel) when the surge hit. This was to protect me, my mom (who was living with us), and our then very young son. At the time, kids under one were considered extremely high risk, so protecting my mom and our son was the most important. But COVID-19 is so unpredictable, it's hard to know how it will affect you, and I think that was, and still is, one of the scariest aspects of this virus. The fear was (and is) a whole other pandemic in itself, one that was very hard to avoid, especially early on.

At the start of the pandemic, we updated our wills. This in and of itself was a surreal experience. My husband and I are in our mid-thirties, but with a young son, we didn't want to leave anything to chance. At this point, the severity of the situation really started to settle in. We weren't just working from home, getting on each other's nerves--he was preparing for a surge, and we had to prepare as a family. I should note that a nursing home less than two miles from our home was hit hard early on, and many people died, so COVID was in Marquette pretty early. We just were not sure when, and how badly, it would spread.

At first, my husband did not have enough PPE. Our neighbor made some masks for us and some family members mailed extras for my husband, as well. Not knowing how long this pandemic would last, not knowing when more supplies would arrive, my husband still felt the need to ration his PPE. (I should note that we stretched this small supply for quite a long time, and early on, healthcare reused masks for days at a time.) Anytime my husband returned from work, he would take off his clothes in the garage, shower immediately, scrub everything down--doorknobs, the bathroom, anything that he touched.

In the early stages of the pandemic, he stayed on the first floor of our home while my mom stayed on the third floor, so they would have as much space from each other as physically possible. We alternated using the second floor to maintain distance as well. I stayed on the top floor with my mom early on, wanting to limit contact and the possibility of getting COVID from my husband. And when I got sick during the first week in quarantine (not COVID, but we were not sure at the time), I did not see my son in-person for the longest stretch of his first year of life. My husband, my mom and I tried to stay as far apart as possible early on, not knowing when the surge would hit.

Should it have hit, we wanted to be ready to isolate from each other quickly. We were ready to put a protective layer of thick plastic at the top of our first-floor stairs, and fully separate from my husband if needed. We thought about renting my husband a separate apartment, which some hospitals were paying for at the time to protect the families of healthcare workers. My husband's employer did not offer this, but we thought it would be worth it to pay out of pocket. We debated this before the surge, but my husband thought it would be too hard to not see our son at all during this incredibly trying time, and that even seeing him through plastic would be better than nothing.

We, as a society (and especially in America), put a lot of pressure on healthcare professionals to be superhuman all of the time, and this pandemic pushed them to a whole other level. Being able to see our son was the main thing bringing my husband joy at this time, so we decided he would isolate on our first floor if needed. My husband is currently looking for a way to reduce his hours so he can decompress from being overworked and overstressed, not only from his past several years in medicine, but especially from this past year. It was just too much.

Summer came and went in Marquette, and the surge still didn't hit. We moved to a new house in July, partly due to the pandemic, and partly to reduce our monthly expenses so that my husband could cut back his hours. At this point, he knew he was reaching a breaking point. Fall arrived, school started and cases in Marquette were still low.

Then October hit. Cases started rising. While most people wore masks, some were still very resistant, even though more and more evidence showed that masks helped slow the spread. My husband had one patient that refused to acknowledge COVID, even though he was hospitalized with it. He left the hospital without a mask, and was back again in a matter of days with an even more severe case of the coronavirus.

The cases rose even higher in Marquette in November. Every day we were wondering if my husband would get it and bring it home. He continued to shed his clothing in the garage, shower immediately, and wash surfaces down. He wore a face mask, glasses, and a face shield at work all day long. When people complain about wearing a face mask out in public for a few hours, I want to scream. Healthcare workers have to wear them all day long while they do extremely stressful and tedious work. The lack of empathy people can have for those fighting this virus head on is still very shocking to me. The lack of acknowledgement that we are all in this together, is also still shocking to me.

Luckily, at this point, my mom had moved into a house of her own, and she was able to isolate if needed. This removed a large burden for us, as my mom is older and at higher risk. We had been VERY careful up to this point, and we did not have any Thanksgiving plans with anyone besides my mom, who only came over for about an hour to celebrate. She had been taking care of our son this whole time, so she was already part of our bubble.

Two days after Thanksgiving, my husband started to feel really ill. He knew it was COVID. He had just spent many days as a hospitalist, treating a lot of patients with COVID--more than the hospital he works for ever planned to treat.

I should note, many people seem to think that masks do not work if people in the hospital can get sick while wearing them but 1) Kids under two don't have to wear masks in Michigan. They go to the doctor, and can easily spread COVID without symptoms. 2) People who are really sick with COVID may not be able to tolerate a mask due to the treatment they need.

Either way, we are pretty sure he got it from work, though perhaps it was community spread. At this point, the positivity rate was 14 or 15%.

He immediately started to feel really, really tired. My mom had not spent much time around us, and she started to isolate immediately. My husband got a test and it came back positive. He moved to our room to isolate, shut the door, and we sealed off the door jam. He also shut off the vents to our room to aid in stopping transmission (this was during a super cold month up here). He even wore a mask inside to better protect me and my son. I was hopeful that I would not get COVID or at least not get it bad, so I could care for our then 18-month-old son. For two days, I felt okay.

Then Monday arrived, and I felt like I had been hit by a truck. It's really hard to describe how this virus feels, but if I had to, I would say it's like the flu and mono and pneumonia all in one. Looking back, I don't know if I have ever been more sick. I went to get tested, and it came back as positive. I went home, crushed and angry. We had been so careful for so long, and we possibly got the virus from someone that couldn't even make a slight change to protect others. I slept for three hours, hoping that the virus would only fatigue me, like it did to my husband.

Part of the fear of this virus is not only the unpredictable nature of it, but the fact that we do not yet know the long-term effects. I've seen everything from long-term vision problems to heart disease. It's scary. The fact that you can infect others so easily is also terrifying. We didn't know what could happen at this point. Thankfully my mom didn't get the virus, but I was terrified that we had perhaps given it to her.

The next day I woke up and still felt terrible--mostly chills and fatigue. I slept a lot again. My husband, who was doing just slightly better, cared for our son, but we were struggling. There was a lot of TV, and there would be a lot of TV, for the next two weeks.

Day 3 hit and I started to feel a little better. I even went for a short walk, but I was still very tired. But at nighttime it got *really* scary. I had rolling fevers, chills, and it was hard to breath. As someone with asthma and anaphylactic reaction to peanuts, this was triggering. It reminded of previous times in my life when I've had trouble breathing. I've been in the ER many times after mistakenly eating some strange peanut products (e.g., peanut powder in salad dressing), and I have had pneumonia twice. Once I had to be on a breathing machine. It brought back a lot of those memories, and that was difficult to deal with while fighting the all of the other COVID symptoms.

On top of my breathing troubles was the fear of what other havoc this virus could reap. After watching the news on the virus for over 7 months, I was going to sleep not knowing if I would wake up. It was terrifying. I would sleep with the lights on because the dark was just too scary. I worried about who would care for my son if something happened to me. This was the scariest part of all, and just part of why I think this pandemic has been so extra hard for parents. I tear up as I write this; thinking about it is still scary to me.

As I just mentioned, I have an inhaler, I have used a nebulizer, and I have had pneumonia twice. This was scarier than both of the times that I was hospitalized with pneumonia. I kept checking my oxygen, and it was hovering around 94. In normal times, I would have taken myself to the emergency room, but as someone married to a doctor, I knew the hospital was already over capacity. I took my inhaler a lot in the first few days. The panic did not help with my asthma, obviously. But when you are fighting an unknown virus, it's hard to stop spiraling.

On Day 4 I lost taste and smell. This was crushing. I know some people for whom smell has not come back. As if dealing with the fatigue, fever, chills, and breathing trouble was not enough, the loss of taste and smell was terrifying. If people were going temporarily deaf or blind, I don't think we would be handling this virus the same way. I am not sure why taste and smell don't seem as important as senses, but they are so necessary to survival. People with loss of smell are at a higher risk of death for many reasons. For example, they might not be able to smell a gas leak. Eating is essential to survival, and I lost the will to eat. I had to force myself to eat broth. Everything chewable tasted like cardboard. I started to worry about what life would be like if taste and smell did not return, especially as someone with a peanut allergy. This was really, really hard for me to deal with when I was already in such a dark place.

At this point, anxiety began to set in. I am not an anxious person; I don't normally have anxiety. But on the night of Day 4, things got really bad. It was getting hard to breathe, and the fever and chills were overwhelming. I was panicking, big time. I don't know if I could call it a full-on panic attack, but I almost drove myself to the ER to get some medication to help calm me down. The unknowns of this virus are a doozy for anxiety, on top of the fact that the virus has been linked to increased anxiety. (I now have a whole new understanding of what people with anxiety are going through.) I kept asking my husband for advice, but he was so fatigued from the virus and solo parenting that he said I should drive myself to the hospital if I needed to. On top of this virus being so hard to deal with physically, it's even harder when you have to take care of a child and can't call for any reinforcement. Again, this is another reason why I think this pandemic has hit parents really hard.

On Day 5, I got nebulizer treatments and instantly started to feel better. I ended up using my nebulizer for the following month. That's how long it took me to feel back to normal. I am 33, have light-to-moderate asthma, and some food allergies, but nothing else. I don't take any medications and have never had any major health issues besides my peanut allergy.

On Days 6-14, the fatigue continued. My husband had fatigue for about 10 days, but felt pressure to get back to work and help take care of other COVID patients, especially now that he had some short-term immunity. I had to BEG him to stay home and help me take care of our son, as I was still so fatigued. I laid on my stomach for many of these days, as it was the only way to make breathing easier. I have to say, I was thankful that I got COVID later on, after proning had been shown to help alleviate breathing issues.

I honestly don't know how we cared for our son during this time. Those two weeks were a huge blur. There was a lot more TV than normal. Thank goodness my mom was able to drop food and medications off, otherwise I don't know what we would have done. For parents that have had this or might get sick, childcare is one of the toughest parts, as you can't get any help without risking exposure. Our son fed himself his bottle for the first time during this period, as we were literally too weak to feed him. Our son is normally super energetic, but for about three days he was totally lethargic. He woke up multiple times a night, making rest and recovery for me and my husband even harder. He was eating solid foods at this point, but would only take bottles for days. We never got him tested because we were too sick and tired, and it seemed unlikely that he *didn't* have it, as he was exhibiting symptoms. He is one of the many COVID patients that has not been counted in the tally.

My breathing issues persisted for about a month. I still get headaches. I've had an ongoing ear infection post-COVID (something I never got before) and my son has dealt with ear infections too. I wonder (and worry) if any other lingering symptoms will show up. My husband has had some headaches since having COVID as well--something neither of us normally get. My smell is still not 100% back. I have some guilt

about my son having had it, not knowing what the long-term effects will be. I am still somewhat worried about lingering effects with my own health. I have had some lingering anxiety, something that I did not have before 2020. I have read that anxiety is unexpressed anger, and I do think I had/and have a lot of anger towards people not taking this pandemic seriously and those not doing their part to help end this pandemic as soon as possible “because they are healthy” or because it has not affected them personally.

My brother lives overseas, had COVID last year, and is still having lingering symptoms. When people talk about how this is just an acute virus, or say “it’s not that bad”, I am just flabbergasted at their ability to ignore the fact that we don’t know the long-term effects. I am also flabbergasted by the lack of empathy I have seen throughout this pandemic. Even if you don’t feel like you are high risk, if wearing a mask makes someone near you feel better, isn’t that a good enough reason to do so? It’s really such a small thing to do in the grand scheme of things.

I work at a public library, and we have been open on and off throughout this time. While most people have been good about wearing their masks, there *has* been pushback, and that has been SO HARD, especially given my husband's line of work. I hate that this pandemic has been made political. Some people just cannot get beyond whatever it is that is preventing them from wearing a mask, and I have to say, it does make me mad, as so many healthcare workers have put their health, and the health of their families, on the line to fight COVID.

I still find it difficult to go to public places, as it’s not clear if everyone will be wearing a mask. Even when I had some likely COVID immunity, I was still uncomfortable. I limit my visits to indoor places as much as possible. I still do grocery pick-up as opposed to going in the store. We have not been to a gym in over a year, and I can’t see joining one again soon. As our son is almost two and cannot be vaccinated, I don’t think we will be doing air travel until he can get a vaccine, and I envision wearing masks in public for quite some time, especially given the uncertainty of different variants.

I am still grieving all of the things lost over the past year, especially with regards to our son: no in-person first birthday, no seeing friends and family for long stretches, and no seeing many friends and family at all. That has been very hard for me.

I think everyone has had a hard time with this pandemic for many reasons, but the inability of some to do what is best for the betterment of all has maybe been the toughest part for me. When people tell me that the pandemic has not changed their life much at all, again, I am flabbergasted. Do they not see all the loss and pain that others have experienced, and feel for them? Over 500,000 lives have been lost. Even if their lives have not changed much, can’t they feel for the healthcare workers, those that have lost someone, those that have had an immeasurably hard time? I have hope for the future, but with how many people are saying they won’t get the vaccine, and the fact that we may not reach herd immunity, AND the fact that that could lead to more variants and potentially more lockdowns (until new vaccines come out) is disheartening to say the least.

This has been a time of all sorts of loss; many people have lost friends and family. The high death toll rings, and the amount of people dealing with lingering symptoms rests heavy on my heart. As we continue to move through this pandemic, I hope people can make choices that keep others safe, physically and emotionally. Humans are social creatures, and this past year has been unnatural for all of us. Empathy will be crucial to healing the damage that has been done. I also hope that we can take the good that has come from this past year and turn it into long-term changes.