

## *Reflections on the Pandemic*

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In January and February of 2020, I never could have imagined the impact COVID-19 would have on the United States and the world. I would overhear my parents' conversations about the spread of the virus in China. Simultaneously, my close friend's family sent masks and hand sanitizer to her relatives in Hong Kong. But for some reason, the concept of lockdown and quarantine always felt distant. As if, somehow, the virus would never reach the U.S.

Living in New York City, the virus soon didn't feel foreign anymore. We all felt the brunt of COVID-19 before most of the country. My small private school in Brooklyn soon transitioned to online learning, and I found that remote school was beneficial for my learning style. Despite the fifty different class schedules I was given, and teachers who couldn't figure out how to use Zoom, the ability to build my schedule and focus without any distractions allowed me to enjoy online learning. I continued to do so for the rest of eighth grade and into my freshman year of high school. Not having to commute to school also allowed me to roll out of bed straight to my desk after my alarm went off—five minutes before my 8:00 AM AP Economics class every morning. I was sleeping more and using my time more efficiently.

The remote format also helped push me to overcome my fears of public speaking. Pre-pandemic, I was extremely shy and would never say a word in class. Somehow, the transition to Zoom and Schoology discussion boards helped me become comfortable sharing ideas that I had previously always kept to myself. While the pandemic created many new fears for me, this was one I overcame because of quarantine.

Even though COVID-19 was constructive for my learning style, that did not diminish the harsh realities of the pandemic. Watching the number of cases and hospitalizations increase was terrifying, and the hundreds and sometimes thousands of people dying each day was heartbreaking. Living in a multigenerational household quickly raised stress levels in my home as we were worried about my grandma's health and did not know much about the virus yet. Not only was I scared that my grandma would get sick, but I was also terrified of getting sick myself.

I struggled with anxiety throughout the entire pandemic. A reasonable fear of getting sick spun out of proportion, and I became terrified of everything I thought could be contaminated. My room was my safe space, and the only place I felt comfortable was under my duvet cover. I washed my hands until they turned red and my skin cracked, almost bleeding from all the soap and disinfectant.

It is difficult for me to look back at this time in my life because I was struggling a lot with my mental health. Fear overcame me. My judgment was so clouded with an intense fear that I had never felt anything like it before. I put so much stress on myself and the members of my household because I was so terrified of contracting COVID-19 that I let it consume me. I didn't go outside, and I didn't see my friends, even when the CDC said it was safe to do so. My mind was playing tricks on me, and at the time, I didn't know how to control it.

I started going to therapy in June of 2020 due to my fears surrounding COVID-19. Therapy helped me cope with the stress I was feeling. I have now learned how to reframe my perspective to not let unreasonable fear control my life. I am not the only one who struggled mentally during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many individuals had a similar experience, and many were hit even harder by the effects of the virus. Quarantine affected me and so many others in ways no one could have predicted. When I look through old photographs or journal entries, it is strange to remember what life was like before masks, isolation, and the loss of over six million lives. Although I benefited from remote learning, my mental health had reached a low point.

When I reflect on my experience, I realize that this low point spurred me to begin therapy and the process of self-development that I would not have started without the pandemic. I am still working on it today. Both stress and the reality of COVID-19 still exist too, but now, I have greater knowledge of myself and how to manage overwhelming fears. Despite days where I felt overcome with fear and anxiety, afraid to leave my house or even just leave my room, I know I wouldn't have the same relationship with my family, control my stress as I can now, or be the person I am today without the pandemic.