After COVID-19

In an opinion piece titled "Recovering From COVID-19," activist and singer Sherri Lewis, who is living with HIV, recounts how she and her mother confronted and overcame COVID-19. Below is an edited excerpt.

May 17, 2021 By Sherri Lewis

I'm a long-term HIV survivor. I know about terror, isolation, loneliness, loss, hazmat suits, false positives, asymptomatic spreaders, condom fatigue, virus variants and resistance—even getting cured of hepatitis C. Nonetheless, the onset of the first COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in California had me panicked.

I thought, I'm locked in with my 90-year-old mother in her assisted care! I just couldn't leave her alone not knowing when I'd see her again. Unable to afford private care for her, I became her caregiver. I took a photo of her sitting in her wheelchair in her dimly lit 400-square-foot room and posted it on my Facebook page.

So masks became the new condoms, in the hope of protecting ourselves from contracting the new coronavirus and possibly ending up on a ventilator in a hospital and dying. I no longer went to the market, avoiding the drama of the anti-mask protesters. I became a shut-in, feeling safer indoors than out.

I could hear ambulances racing to a hospital blocks away day and night. This was going to take much more time—months, maybe more. My mom's facility opened up only to shut down again. Frustrated, the voice in my head began screaming, "We need testing! Where's the testing?"

A few days later, there was a knock on our door. It was the nurse and her assistant. They had come to test us. The nurse asked, "Could you please bring your mother to the door so we can give her a COVID test?" I pushed my mom's wheelchair up to the door. The nurse stuck a long cotton swab up her nose while my mom squeezed my hand.

Then it was my turn. I had a scratchy throat and was already sneezing. I was anxious about my COVID test. I had been confident taking my HIV test in 1987 because I had no symptoms, even though I was positive. My COVID fears were mounting.

A few days later, I got the call: "You tested positive for COVID." Déjà vu. I felt numb. I thought, Is this it? Is this how I'm going to die? In a retirement home taking care of my mother? After 34 years living with HIV, is this how it ends?

The next day, my mother’s test came back positive. My heart broke. I was horrified. Both of us had COVID-19. What a nightmare. I began to steel myself for what might lie ahead.

Thankfully, we got through that night and the next, counting those following days with a watchful eye. As bad as I felt, I had a mild case. The virus made its way out soon enough, 10 days for both of us. Some residents moved out to be with their families. Some went to the hospital sick.

I could see medical trays in front of several rooms on our floor. I felt stigmatized by the medical tray that sat outside our door, a remnant from my HIV past. We were quarantined in our room with COVID-19 for 15 days. Sadly, COVID-19 did claim a few of the residents.

It has been a year since COVID-19 entered our lives. My mom and I are now both vaccinated against the new coronavirus, as is the entire facility. We celebrated her 91st birthday. It’s going to be an adjustment. We’re grateful for a new day and a compassionate new president.

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