

TPWKY

This is Exactly Right.

(This Podcast Will Kill You intro theme)

Erin Welsh

Hi, I'm Erin Welsh.

Erin Allmann Updyke

And I'm Erin Allmann Updyke.

Erin Welsh

And this is This Podcast Will Kill you.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Welcome to our 19th episode of our Anatomy of a Pandemic series.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, 19.

Erin Allmann Updyke

19. So over the last year and plus, year and several months, we've covered so many different angles of the COVID-19 pandemic and we've asked so, so many questions.

Erin Welsh

So many questions.

Erin Allmann Updyke

So many. Some of them have been very big picture like how has the pandemic amplified these already existing health disparities? And some have been very detailed like what have we learned about the SARS-CoV-2 surface proteins and the role that they play in clinical disease?

Erin Welsh

But throughout all of these episodes and all of these topics, there's been one linking factor and that is that this pandemic is happening to all of us.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah.

Erin Welsh

If you've listened to the podcast before, either with this COVID series or in our normal episodes, you know that one thing we always include is a firsthand account. And we do that to humanize the disease or the topic that we're covering to remind ourselves and everyone listening that these are real things happening to real people. And for many of us I think this pandemic has really brought that point home.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah.

Erin Welsh

Because each and every one of us, whether we've gotten COVID ourselves or not, has been impacted by this pandemic and also no two people have experienced the same thing.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Right. So what we wanted to do in this particular episode is just to dedicate the entirety of it to your stories. We have gotten so many incredible firsthand accounts from listeners, from you all, since we started asking for them and we feel so fortunate for everyone who took the time and was willing to share their stories with us and with all of you who are listening. And the truth is we've received way more firsthands than we have episodes planned and since our plan for now is to have just one more episode in this after this one, although this pandemic constantly changes so we could end up revisiting it.

Erin Welsh

Absolutely.

Erin Allmann Updyke

But we just wanted to devote an entire episode to featuring as many of these stories as we could.

Erin Welsh: Yeah. But first we have some business to take care of.

Erin Allmann Updyke: We always do.

Erin Welsh: (laughs) It is quarantini time.

Erin Allmann Updyke: It is.

Erin Welsh: But it's kind of an unusual one. Erin, what are we doing for this quarantini time?

Erin Allmann Updyke: For this quarantini time we're asking you all to tell us what's your quarantini of the day? What are you drinking this pandemic?

Erin Welsh: Right. Yeah, what's been your cocktail or mocktail, quarantini or placebortia of choice throughout the past year? Have you found any new recipes that you really like? We wanna hear from you.

Erin Allmann Updyke: Exactly.

Erin Welsh: Erin, what's been your favorite?

Erin Allmann Updyke: I think of our COVID series quarantinis my favorite one was #17. That was with gin and lemon juice and grenadine, it was just like really beautiful.

Erin Welsh: Oh it is really beautiful, yeah. (laughs) I think mine is I think something that I have always loved and that is Quarantini 2 which is just bourbon and ginger ale and lime juice.

Erin Allmann Updyke: Can't go wrong.

Erin Welsh: So a Kentucky Mule. It's such an easy go-to, I always have some sort of delicious ginger ale in the fridge. I like trying out new ginger ales or ginger beers.

Erin Allmann Updyke: I did know that about you as a matter of fact.

Erin Welsh: Shout out to Ale-8, the best Kentucky ginger ale. But yeah and those are already on our website so if you would like to see them, check out thispodcastwillkillyou.com.

Erin Allmann Updyke: Speaking of thispodcastwillkillyou.com, you can find so many other fun things on our website like transcripts from every episode, all of the sources that we list from all of our episodes, we've got a link to our bookshop.org account, a link to our Patreon and Bloodmobile our music. Everything that you could want, it's on our website. Check it out.

Erin Welsh: Absolutely. Before we dive into the episode we did wanna note a couple of things. The first is that some of these stories may include content that some people might find difficult to hear so please use discretion when deciding whether or not to listen. And secondly, some of these firsthands were recorded at various stages of the pandemic so they may not reflect what things look like currently so just keep that in mind. But okay, I think we are ready to get started. So let's take a quick break and then begin.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

"Hi, I'm Alex. I think this pandemic has a veil of misunderstanding about it. It's personal and impersonal at the same time. Understood and confusion-causing within the same breath. You could know of someone who has the disease and recovers or one that dies and it all feels the same until it's really close to you. That's at least how I felt. Not for lack of understanding or empathy, I just did my due diligence and made sure I was clean, masked, and distanced so we can come out of this. By trade I am a marine biologist. I study maternal age effects in a small species of marine rotifers. I'm educated enough in biological processes to understand that this pandemic shouldn't be taken lightly but I'm not educated enough to know how you deal with it firsthand when a loved one won't listen, especially after it's too late.

My father hasn't always been around. He was an alcoholic with mental illness and I can't really blame him for my siblings and I's upbringing. In the last 6 years however, he has made a resurgence with a will to change. In 6 years he has made his mental health his responsibility, gotten sober, remarried, and rekindled a relationship with my brother and me. He finally made life events a priority, sending birthday cards on the right day with proper age and even attending graduation. He even made it a point to call me every week regardless of if he had anything new to tell me. Lately it had been more of, 'Al, do you really think this is real?' So when I had not heard from him in over two weeks I thought it odd. Maybe he was just back to his old ways? Was he upset that I couldn't make time to go social distance fishing? perhaps he will only have his tantrum and call me tomorrow or the next day or next week.

I didn't expect the call when I did. 4 o'clock in the morning is never a time for good news. A voicemail I still refuse to delete from my phone. My stepmother was frantically letting the cat out of the bag that my father had contracted COVID-19 about a week prior and didn't let me know. He thought it was no big deal but now it was a big deal. He was now in a coma, oxygen saturation on the floor and he was critical. After rushing to her side, everything became a blur. My job didn't matter, doctors calls became less than hourly, he was up, down. Did I really not have time to go fishing? Does he know I love him? Why won't they let me in with PPE? I'm a scientist after all, I understand this. I had not understood it thoroughly until it happened to me. The pleas from families and loved ones and medical professionals on the television and social media hadn't shone enough light on this well educated marble skull. I was doing the best I could so how cold I understand what they were going through? I indeed was socially and emotionally distancing.

It's been a month and in the blink of an eye 55 years has been wiped off this planet. The ICU nurses at Mass General Hospital allowed us, his three children, to hold his hands as he went. His sighs and gasps were something I'll never forget as long as I live. As we sent him off into the next world, just as he welcomed me into this one 27 years ago, I felt an odd comfort in knowing I wasn't alone. Plenty of relationships have been interrupted by this pandemic leaving little room for the good stuff. I'm educated enough now in the part of this pandemic that I have missed. Take part in whatever good things you can with them and hold out hope that we can all go fishing again real soon."

Anonymous 1

I moved to Arizona in the end of March 2020. After leaving a very toxic 10 year marriage I just wanted a fresh start. Going through the final stages of a divorce as the state was shutting down made the process even more difficult. Everything was over the phone with the lawyers, that part I was fine with because then I didn't have to see my ex. But waiting for him to agree to everything, sign and mail papers back, and then waiting for the divorce to be granted by the judge felt like it took years. Getting a new social security card to legally change my name back took almost the entire year because of the pandemic. Before moving I was working at an animal hospital in Oklahoma and we had to switch over to curbside service probably about two weeks before I left. Appointments started by taking as detailed of a medical history over the phone from the owners, then we ran outside to retrieve the pets and bring them in for the exam and treatment.

Working in veterinary medicine and animal welfare takes a huge toll on employees and their mental health. Compassion fatigue and burnout is a huge problem and working through the pandemic has made it even worse. Now I work 10-13 hours day on my feet 4-5 days a week. It is impossible for my coworkers and I to keep 6 feet apart because treating an animal usually takes at least two people. Animals can be fractious, masks fall off. I've been exposed to COVID at least 5 times that I know of and have been very lucky to not get it. Up until the end of February I was getting tested at least once a week because of the number of people that approach me outside of my clinic without a mask on. I left my first job in Arizona after 2 months because they refused to protect us and started to let clients back in the hospital in July. After telling my bosses I did not feel safe they told me, and I quote: "We should assume our clients are taking the right precautions and that they are all negative for COVID."

I took my two week COVID leave the next day and then I resigned because the thought of going back made me feel extremely panicked. The current hospital I work for is a lot smaller and we only allow clients in with their pets if it's for euthanasia. We are currently very understaffed and overbooked, we still accept new clients, our surgeries are booked out at least a month, and our appointments are booking out 1-2 weeks. I'm usually at work 2 hours late every shift trying to finish my medical notes, fill prescriptions, and clean. A lot of clients are very understanding and nice but the other half are very rude and angry which lands on the technicians and receptionist. I'm exhausted and I know my friends in the field are too. I was in school but I took spring of 2020 off to move and then I decided to take this semester off because I mentally could not do online classes and work. I'm hoping to be in a medical lab technician program bu next year.

I suffer from panic disorder, severe anxiety, depression, and I was sick a lot growing up. Even though my asthma and my heart arrhythmia are not severe, the thought of getting COVID is still very scary to me especially because I do not have health insurance. I received my final Pfizer vaccine February 18th and I will say it has helped my mental health a lot. I have seen a few friends and spend a lot more time with my parents who live here and are fully vaccinated as well. However large gatherings and seeing people in public and in stores without masks still heightens my anxiety. I've not seen the rest of my family in over a year but now that they are all vaccinated as well I have made the decision to fly home to Oklahoma in June to visit them. Hugging my grandma has been and will continue being the light at the end of the tunnel for me and I'm holding onto that.

Sarah

Hi, my name is Sarah and I'm a bus driver which is considered an essential service. Under normal circumstances we carry over 7 million people a year, the majority coming from the local university. When it closed its doors during spring break last March, ridership went down significantly. Even with a 70% decrease in ridership in 2020 due to the pandemic it remained a very stressful job with many new challenges. Frequent policy changes like installation of plexiglass barriers in my driver's area, rear door entry, passenger limits, health screenings to work, social distancing interesting he building and buses, last minute schedule changes for reduced service, disinfecting the buses regularly, and mask requirements have been difficult to keep up with.

This last fall, university students came back for classes. I think the political climate and science denial increased the challenge of enforcing our mask policy. I have had numerous altercations with highly defensive and cranky and easily agitated passengers which sets off my anxiety. This is not a normal thing since traditionally most of our passengers are pretty mild-mannered. I never thought the sight of a person's nose would become a source of rage and anxiety in me but it has. It all actually makes me nervous to go to work some days and my mental health has taken a hit.

At the end of July I did end up getting COVID-19. For me it felt just like a sinus cold and I was actually in denial that it was COVID until they called me and told me I was positive. I didn't experience any of the major symptoms commonly talked about like fever or shortness of breath, I feel it was almost certainly contracted through my job but I don't have a known exposure. I was able to be part of a paid monoclonal antibodies drug study which at least made me feel like I was doing my part to help. However there was a lot of shame involved with calling people to tell them I may have exposed them. Unfortunately among the exposed was my father who was recently diagnosed with stage IV cancer and it pushed his treatment back by like a month which I felt extremely guilty for. Thankfully he didn't get it.

Along with the stress of my job and experience with COVID I have nonstop worry and anxiety about my family. I am close to my grandparents who are both in their 90s and will most certainly die if they were to get COVID-19. The stress of potentially exposing them vs giving up precious time with them has been unbearable. My mom and sister are both essential workers as well. My sister lives on the West Coast working in a lab with COVID-positive patient samples and my mom works in a high exposure position as a cashier. I worry about her a lot.

COVID-19 has affected so many aspects of my life, I've lost count. My job, finances, mental health, family, and friends. I feel guilty because I've been pretty lucky when compared to others. I got to keep my job and hours, I didn't have to be stuck in the house all day everyday which would have certainly driven me crazy. To date I haven't lost anyone from this disease and to my knowledge I'm the only one in my family that has had it. As an essential worker I should be able to get the vaccine soon which will help me breathe a little easier about getting COVID-19 again or unknowingly passing it along to my at risk family members. So that's my story. Thanks for listening.

Anonymous 2

I'm from Canada, currently living in Beijing working at an international school. I have been in Beijing throughout the pandemic and January marks one year of adapting to the changes brought by SARS-CoV-2. Testing has become a normal part of life. As a teacher I've had six COVID tests, none of which were given due to symptoms or specific concern of exposure. They were group tests before school openings and after holidays. My school provides me with surgical masks to wear while teaching and a package of extra masks for any student who may forget their own. Student temperatures are taken and recorded four times a day and we have a designated isolation room for any student showing symptoms and designates breakout rooms should any group of students need to be moved.

In Beijing life is very much phone-based and the government has the power to quickly track and trace. Almost everyone uses an app called WeChat and within WeChat they built a health registration component. I use that to register my phone number when eating at a restaurant, entering a cinema or a mall, I can also access the results of my COVID test through this app usually within 24 hours of getting the test. There's a balance between feeling relatively safe, I celebrated Christmas with a gathering of friends and I'm able to go out to a restaurant, to see a movie but also still very cautious. Mask-wearing is very consistent and the quarantine policy here is strict. When seemingly small numbers of cases are found, entire communities are tested and that might mean millions of tests over a few days. Here a positive test regardless of illness severity means isolation at a government quarantine facility even more very young children. Entering the country involves weeks of centralized quarantine and testing.

As a teacher this has definitely been a year of rapid emergency growth. In the first days of remote learning I was incredibly thankful to have already started technology routines and know that my students have access to technology. But those beginning days were definitely hit or miss and the teaching communities that I follow were still months away from their own remote learning switch. In the early days, given the unknowns at the time, international schools told both staff and students that they were not required to be present in Beijing, they could stay put wherever they were on holiday but should be ready to return at short notice. After much agonizing my partner and I opted to stay, worrying about risk of exposure during travel and not having an appropriate place to self-isolate in Canada as both our parents have risk factors. We all had the sense that things would be back to normal in a few weeks.

As an educator I really struggled to help my students make sense of this new reality that extended way beyond a few weeks. Many students ended up in different time zones, dealing with the separation from friends, and the uncertainty of different lockdown responses as the pandemic unfolded. Some of my students are of Asian descent and it broke my heart as they also had to navigate the racist rhetoric emerging on their social media platforms as the world began to point fingers. In late March, China closed its borders to foreign passport holders regardless of visa. This added a whole level of uncertainty as most of our colleagues were out of country. The local community did a lot to take care of us and our other colleagues who had stayed, making sure that we understood news updates and checking in on us quite often.

Looking back I don't know if I would change our early days decision to stay in the country. It turned out that we had a lot more freedoms than back home. Beijing never fully shut down but we were also cut off from family and friends. When we initially decided to stay last January we hadn't even considered that there would still be an issue in the summer when we would normally go home to Canada. With the process of re-entry to China quite complicated and still new we could not leave during the summer and I have not seen my family in over a year. It's taken around 6 months and we've got almost all of our teachers and students back to the city. It feels bizarre, almost as if the time apart never happened. Things are oddly normal but with an undercurrent of alertness. I'd just really like to see my family safely again sometime soon.

Will

I'm Will from the Boston area. I'm an hourly assistant house manager for a theater company as well as a musician and writer. I have been unemployed for over a year now due to the pandemic. The effects on the arts and entertainment industries are truly devastating and I don't think people will see the full effects of it until at least winter as we are thought of as unimportant fields despite being things that provide a lot of joy. Many of the salaried staff members who work in theater had to be laid off, without active live shows there wasn't enough money or work to keep everyone employed. I imagine live concert venues and museums were hurt the same way.

I feel grateful that my parents can help me out and that the recent economic relief package passed because I have asthma and have been scared to be around too many people in enclosed spaces. Luckily I was just vaccinated the day before I recorded this so I am going to start looking to see if there are any jobs in my area in restaurants or retail but I have no idea if anyone's hiring while there's still a lot of places that have reduced capacities indoor. A lot of people have asked me how creative I've felt or if I've accomplished anything musically this past year and I've struggled to feel creative which along with the feeling of isolation has caused my anxiety level to worsen a lot and frankly I'm also most creative when I'm busy, so working always helped me. While I've furthered a few projects very slightly there hasn't been a full product that I've been able to complete this year.

I am also a queer man and I'm feeling a loss of connection to the LGBTQ community. I used to be around numerous LGBTQ people almost daily and now the only member I'm around daily is my roommate. I don't know what interactions I could have with queer people until the theater company I work for reopens and a lot of our bars and clubs have closed so many LGBTQ people are fully losing their place to gather. Without places to gather it is much more difficult to feel a sense of community and to heal together. It is odd to feel so separated during the pandemic because there's also been a rise in hate crimes against LGBTQ people and a furthering of attempts by some politicians to use laws to allow forms of discrimination. The transgender and non-binary communities are especially hurt by all of that. I'm hoping that by June we will be able to have our regular pride celebrations and parades in some form or another but I'm not sure if that's going to be possible yet. Thank you.

Kristin

Hi, my name is Kristin and I work as a charge nurse and supervisor at a major hospital in Los Angeles, California which has become an epicenter for COVID-19. My unit previously was a cardiac unit which turned COVID step-down back in March. As a charge nurse each day I am asked to pronounce patients deceased, provide post mortem care, and bag the patient and their belongings. Daily I have difficult conversations with family members that only one healthy visitor can come and say goodbye to their loved one. As a cardiac nurse, this is something that we don't encounter often. Our patients are typically those suffering heart attacks and yes, while their heart stops and we give CPR to bring them back to life, they often survive and go on to the ICU for further treatment.

COVID patients are not like this. Each day we often have 1-2 emergency situations where we are placing patients on the ventilator and rushing them to the ICU. Oftentimes they may be elderly and by placing them on the ventilator they may never come off, the physicians decide not to pursue this. Instead they sit on my unit, gasping for air until their last breath, often alone as we do not allow visitors unless a patient is actively dying. If a full code patient's heart stops, we have a device to do compressions for us so we expose less staff members during this aerosolizing procedure. We have had families admitted in rooms next door to each other, visitors who have snuck in and given other patients COVID who were never positive, and many staff members who are getting sick.

Currently in my hospital staffing has also become an issue where we are overriding state mandated nurse to patient ratios just to care for the COVID surge that has come in through our doors. We went from a COVID-positive census of 40 patients before Halloween to over 400 COVID-positive patients. This is not slowing down. As a healthcare worker I can speak for many of us when we say we are getting tired and our mental health is suffering.

I can personally say I have started going to therapy and started medication because of what I am going through. I could go on for hours about the struggles we face as healthcare workers during this pandemic. We are here to do our jobs and save lives but it is harder and harder each and every day. We wear our masks to protect the public but who is wearing their masks to protect us? It is an everyday struggle for the last 9 months and this is not going away. I am proud to say I'm receiving my second round of the vaccine tomorrow and I hope to do my part in ridding the world of this horrible virus. Thank you.

Rebecca

My name is Rebecca and I am a university climate scientist in North Carolina. 2020 was going to be the year that my husband and I tried to start a family. In late February I took a pregnancy test and was more than a little surprised that it was positive because the timing was so soon after I had had my birth control removed. I didn't know how pregnant I was so I scheduled my first ultrasound for mid March. And my husband and I were really excited about getting to meet with the doctor and see our baby but things were changing so quickly in North Carolina that by the time mid March got here, the OB/GYN was only allowing patients. So I had to go by myself but that was no problem. I found out I was about 6 weeks pregnant and things looked good. But it was too early for a heartbeat. So I scheduled a follow up ultrasound for 3 weeks later.

And over those next 3 weeks things did not go well. I started spotting and I came in for blood work. And even though my pregnancy hormone levels were increasing, my spotting was getting worse and so when I came in for that next ultrasound I was pretty sure I'd miscarried. And I was right. Laying down on the table alone for those 10 minutes while the ultrasound technician did her job, having to go back out into the waiting room alone to meet with the nurse all while being surrounded by other women who were very visibly pregnant, I was thankful that I was wearing a mask so I could hide some of my crying. And then ultimately meeting with the nurse and not even being able to squeeze hands because we needed to socially distance. It was just an awful, awful day. I came in regularly over the next 3 weeks as I went through rounds of medication to complete the miscarriage and that was ultimately unsuccessful and I had to have surgery. And going to a hospital, no matter which wing in the middle of a pandemic is nerve-wracking.

The one and a half months that I went through my miscarriage happened to coincide with the start of lockdowns here in North Carolina and our understanding of this disease and how it spreads was changing really quickly. So from one week to the next I was wearing gloves into the office, leaving my mask in the car at first because it just felt weird to wear one and then always wearing a mask because suddenly not having one now felt weird. COVID took what was already a pretty terrible and traumatic experience and just made it so much more isolating. And the worst part is not knowing if I miscarried because miscarriages happen and this is just part of life or if it was the immense stress of that period or if I somehow had COVID and there's a relationship we just don't know about yet.

Erin Allmann Updyke

We'll pause here to take a break and be back with more stories in just a few minutes.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Allmann Updyke

"Hi, my name is Samantha and I've been struggling with depression and anxiety since I was 4 years old and PTSD since I was 6. I'm 23 now and I've spent a lot of time on finding the right medication and coping skills to survive these illnesses. I started my first semester at the University of Tennessee and discovered that COVID has not only stripped away the majority of my coping mechanisms for depression, anxiety, and PTSD but it stripped away my study strategies. That combined with 3 months of spotty WiFi landed me back into the psychiatric hospital where I was able to meet and talk with other people in the same boat. At the time I'm writing this, it's been 2 weeks since my stay at the hospital. My medicine isn't working the way it should and I'm looking into finding a new psychiatrist to help me sort things out.

Going to school during COVID is immensely difficult. At the start of the semester everybody was new to the online learning process which for me meant a lot of assignments fell through the cracks while I learned how to navigate the online environment and I couldn't ask for extensions for little assignments because the teachers were still figuring it out as well. What made learning the ropes especially difficult for me was that each of my teachers had their dashboards set up differently.

On top of all this, my WiFi connection was really bad despite paying a lot of money for it and often cut out during my lessons. If it didn't turn back on before the end of class I would have to wait for the recorded lecture to come out to catch up later. The spotty WiFi made taking exams exponentially more difficult. Once during the second round of exams my WiFi cut out 15 minutes before the start and I had to drive to my friend's house to use their WiFi. While I was there there was a deadly crash on the highway leading back to my apartment and I wasn't able to go home for 2 hours after I'd finished the exam. What made this so unbearable was that during this time I was so incredibly lonely. Making friends through Zoom classes with 100 different people is difficult.

Two weeks before finals I experienced a major depressive episode. I couldn't eat, I woke up multiple times a night covered in sweat from nightmares, and every time I tried to go to class I had a panic attack. After a week of intrusive suicidal thoughts and not being able to get out of bed I checked myself into the hospital. It was there that I was able to meet and commiserate with people in similar situations. During one of our group therapy sessions, somebody asked the social worker if COVID-19 had caused an increase in admittance to the psychiatric hospital. Surprisingly the social worker said no, admittance rates have remained stable but of those who are coming to the hospital, many cite COVID-19 as the reason they need help. What I learned from my stay is that it's important to remember that we are not alone in this fight. If your current coping mechanisms aren't working, you are not alone. There is help out there available to you. All you need to do is ask. Thank you for listening."

Stephanie

Hi, my name is Stephanie, I'm a registered nurse originally from Australia. I came to London, U.K. to work as a nurse in late February 2020 before COVID-19 took control of the world. I'm now working on the frontline helping people here in London. As of right now I've been fully vaccinated but we still have a huge uphill battle here in London as the death toll in the U.K. is well over 100,000 now. But the story I wanna share is more about how I'm stuck here. As I said before I'm from Australia, I accepted the job here in London back in October 2019. At the time my plan was to live and work in London, on my days off explore Europe, and still fly home to see my friends and family about once a year. But it's looking like years not months before I can see my family again.

Australia has locked its borders to the rest of the world and honestly it's for good reason if you just look at the infection numbers. As we were getting 20,000 cases a day here in the U.K., Australia often had zero. But this means Australians like me can't go home. I think the hardest period was during Christmas. A lot of my international colleagues at work were from either mainland Europe or from the North Americas and a lot of them got to fly home to see their families, all they needed was a negative COVID-19 test. But Australia, it's by permission-based with the government, you have to have good reason to visit Australia and with that you also have to pay for your full 2 week hotel quarantine.

But the biggest issue I have is that I'm not time rich enough to do something like that. Like I am a nurse and they're not really giving out annual leave during a pandemic to nurses in spades right now and so I would find myself flying all the way down to spend 2 weeks alone in a hotel room to then come out, see my family for like 2 days before I have to jump back on a plane to fly back to the U.K.

After one month of living here in London I got COVID-19. All my friends and family were in Australia, I had to nurse myself, I felt completely alone in my apartment, it was one of the scariest weeks of my life. I'd only been here for a month so I hadn't been registered to the free healthcare here yet in the U.K. so I had no idea how to even access healthcare if I needed it. I remember laying in my bed, hearing the crackles in my chest as I was trying to breathe, realizing that no one in this country knew me well enough to even come to my apartment to see if I was still alive in this bed. But I got over it, I still work everyday, right now my life consists of going to work, back to my apartment, and the repeat.

London and the U.K. has been in some sort of hard lockdown for 8 of the 12 months I've been here now but I've never been so busy in my nursing career and that includes crisis nursing during the Australian bush fires of 2019. I'm very fortunate and lucky that I live in a world that I can video call my friends and family back home but it isn't the same as being able to hug my mum and dad. If I knew it would be the last time I'd see them in years, not months, I definitely would've held them longer at Sydney airport before I said my goodbyes.

Anonymous 3

I am an elementary school teacher at a small private school in one of our major cities here in the U.S. Back in March we were thrust into online learning with little to no guidance or preparation and no experience whatsoever. We were expected to teach the students remotely, trying to learn how to use Meet, Google Classroom and all of these websites that we had actually never even heard of. And teaching from home was incredibly difficult, especially having an infant at home. My husband was working as was I and I was struggling to film live lessons as well as film lessons late into the night. The workload was intense and I was on my computer from dawn until well past my normal bedtime. We all did our best and we were met with a variety of responses. Many people were supportive, compassionate, and appreciative while others constantly ripped us apart and demanded more, especially online. Reading online comments still is incredibly hurtful.

Matters got worse in the fall when we returned to the classroom. Many other school districts around the country have been remote but we've been in person so far the entire year. Being with my students is so wonderful and I love forming the connections with them. I of course would prefer to always be in school with them however I have both in school and remote students as well as multiple classrooms. I have no lunch breaks, no preps aside from a bathroom break and I spend the entire day in one of two classrooms. My workload is triple what it normally is and I never have a moment to just sit and take a deep breath. The only time I have for that is my long commute home and to school. Many of the students are really far below grade level and since we're 6 feet apart, it's impossible to do small group work or even one-to-one work. All of us teachers, especially at my school, make a horribly low wage and we are stretched so thin during a normal year. This year we're really having a hard time.

I absolutely love my job, I adore the students and the families, I just know that a lot of us teachers are really struggling this year. We're told to take care of ourselves but how can we? We are struggling to even get through the day. We are heroes one minute, selfish the next, and I just really hope that things change soon. Nothing is more important to us teachers than the connections with our students and we love these kids as if they are our own. But we are really having a hard time getting through this year. And we're also worried about our own safety. So just remember that next time you see a teacher, maybe give them I would say a high five but don't do that. Thank you.

Anonymous 4

For as long as I can remember, even before I understood it completely as a little girl, mental illness has been foremost in my mind. My family has been torn by it. Both my mom and my stepbrother have struggled with major depression for years. My mom also has schizophrenia which since it's coupled with depression is differentiated as schizoaffective disorder. My parents divorced years ago because of my mother's condition. They have made it hard for her to care for herself and as a result she has some health conditions as well including sleeping problems and type 2 diabetes. When the pandemic began I knew it was gonna be a difficult road but I did not expect it to last as long as it has.

I worried about my mom and my stepbrother so much. My mom didn't understand why it was important to stay home. She would often forget to use her mask because of cognitive struggles due to the schizophrenia I had to repeat over and over again the same talk that we had already had about how the virus could affect her and those around her. She hated being cooped up in the house and although I tried to convince her not to, she went to the store to visit her friends daily. I was away in Guatemala for the semester when she started having really extreme back pain and one day when I talked to her on the phone she told me that she was in so much pain that she wanted it to end, she just wanted to die. I tried to calm her down, to help her somehow. I felt too far away. I felt powerless.

That's how I felt towards my brother's situation as well. Many people had basically ignored his cries for help, claiming that it was attention seeking or that he would get over it soon enough. He was only 15, I think, when he started having these symptoms of depression. But as the pandemic wore on he felt more and more isolated. He finally started going to counseling when he was allowed to which helped a bit but being away from people he spent so many days just doing his online classes, playing video games, or listening to music, nothing more. And he was breaking. In talks that he had had with some of us siblings he said that he just wanted it all to end. He felt like he made everything worse. We tried to console him as best we could, reassuring him that he had always been the one to cheer us up and to make us laugh. But with school and with our work and everything else, most of us were busy with our own stresses. I wish I hadn't been so busy and I wish I hadn't been so far away.

On January 21st of this year my dad sent me a message saying to call him, that it was an emergency. I was in an online class through Zoom but I turned my camera off and called him as soon as I had seen the message. He told me that my brother took his own life. I didn't know what to do or what to say. I was stunned and sobbing but I tried to hold back the tears. He left a huge hole in our family, my brother. I miss him so much. My siblings were all able to be at his funeral but I was in Guatemala still and I couldn't come back, both because of travel restrictions and because of personal reasons. I saw the funeral over the internet. I have since had my own problems with my health both mental and medical which has been harder to cope with than ever. I don't know if my current mental state is just because of the stress and pain because of what has happened with my brother and with my mom or if it's something that I have just tended well to hide until now.

Since then my siblings and I and many people that were closest to my brother have come closer but we have also suffered big mental tolls from what happened. We're not doing good. I don't think anyone is right now. This pandemic has been so difficult for everyone regardless of party alignment, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status. It's a bad one. I just hope that we can come closer although we're mourning. I pray that we become better towards each other and we stop judging those around us and acting like their problems don't matter or are less significant than our own. We're all fighting our own battles and we need each other now during the pandemic and always.

Katie

My name is Katie and I am from Topeka, Kansas. I gave birth to our first child in January. In March, right after coming off of maternity leave, I changed jobs and had to move out of state from my partner for 3 months. This had all been in the works way before COVID but we happened to move me the same week everything started shutting down. Even before COVID I had been experiencing symptoms of postpartum depression but after COVID it really ramped up. The isolation and inability to go anywhere to take a break from the baby really made things worse. Everyone kept saying we'll make time for self care but it's impossible when most of your usual self care activities are based on leaving the house, going to movies, coffee shops, etc.

I'm only just starting to come out of the postpartum depression now. I know other moms must be going through this too but there really isn't a platform for it. My son is almost a year old now and has yet to meet another baby his age or really any kid in general. I know he'll be fine but I wish we could've experienced normal mother-baby bonding of babies and playgroups and park outings, maybe that would've made things a little bit easier.

Kate Crawford

Hi there, my name is Kate Crawford, I am in my mid-20s and I currently live in Lexington, Kentucky. I work as a therapeutic child support worker who works with youth that are on the autism spectrum and are also part of the foster care system. I used to work for a big grocery store chain in the pickup department and was there when the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. My department was notified in late February of changes occurring due to a rise in this new illness myself nor my coworkers knew very much about. I didn't think it was gonna be severe. Maybe like the flu. I was very wrong. We were also informed about a possible lockdown and how our number of orders were gonna increase.

March rolls in and that's when everything changed. The number of our orders increased dramatically but the way customers reacted to us also changed. Customers were scared, they were confused, and they didn't want any contact with any other person than themselves. Some of the customers were very nice to us in the beginning, stating that we were keeping the country going alongside the healthcare workers. However as the lockdown persisted, customers became ruder and the respect we were given wasn't there anymore. Customers would scream at us because the store had been wiped out of certain items that we had no control over and our management weren't really the kindest to us either, pushing us to do more and more even though we were already doing the most that we possibly could.

That's when our mental health really took a toll. Many of my coworkers and myself had been working very long hours, even overtime, nonstop. The grocery chain gave us hero pay which only lasted about a month before it became too costly and was taken away. We were also risking our health by being at work. Our department is not big so coworkers cannot conform to the 6 foot rule. We're basically standing on top of each other. Deep cleaning by the grocery chain was spoken about as if it had happened but we didn't see it. As I said, mental health suffered. People considered friends were getting tired of each other because we were always around them. Where arguments and bad feelings became a prevalent situation for us. We didn't really have that system of distraction that we normally had. We couldn't go to restaurants, we couldn't go to movies, we couldn't simply be outside to decompress and because of that a lot of us suffered burnout.

What I hope a lot of people understand is that mental health is very important and it is very important to those essential workers that might not be in the healthcare field but are still doing stuff everyday for the functioning of society. My coworkers and I, we were on our feet constantly. Some of us never took our breaks, some of us had to be forced to take our breaks even though we were extremely busy and we have customers screaming at us almost every day and we were just constantly busy. And now yes, that is nothing like what the healthcare workers experienced and I don't want to say that we are as equal as them. But mental health, as I just said, is very important and a lot of my coworkers talked about quitting.

Our department, the pickup department in this grocery store chain is very high stress. And we are very much required to be fast. And when that doesn't happen, consequences come which leads to more burnout and which leads to people being drained and people not being able to do their job efficiently. And as this pandemic persists the mental health struggle is probably going to persist as well. And while I'm glad that I had a job during the pandemic I'm very happy to have moved on into the job that I have now.

Robin

My name's Robin and as I'm recording this it's day 2 of the third national lockdown here in the U.K. The majority of my COVID-19 experience is probably very similar to everybody else's. I've lost my job, I've feared for the health and safety of loved ones some of which have had COVID and managed to thankfully pull through without too many complications. I've barely left my house since February, March time last year. And overall it's been a pretty terrifying and just completely bewildering experience. But there has been one really good thing to come out of it that has allowed me to look at the whole situation in a much more positive light that maybe others haven't had the chance to do. At the end of February last year I started talking to my girlfriend.

We were just arranging to meet up when the U.K. went into its first lockdown and so we were kind of stuck on what we were gonna do, how we were gonna proceed. The time that lockdown gave us allowed us to really get to know each other and over the three months, the three initial months of the first lockdown here in the U.K. that we were able to talk, we really got to know each other on a level that I don't think would have been possible had we dated in a way that is or was the normal for people here in the U.K. When we did finally get to meet after three months of talking, while there was a massive amount of pressure to live up to this hype that we'd kind of built for each other, it was like meeting someone that I'd known for my whole life and it was an easy transition into talking to this person that I'd met online at the beginning of a lockdown and really gotten to know to then finally being able to meet them in person.

When lockdown restrictions started to ease we were able to spend a lot of time together and we've been together ever since and it's amazing and I'm so incredibly thankful. But right now we're in the third national lockdown here in the U.K. and it's been a month since I saw her and I expect it'll be at least another two months since I see her. While I'm massively grateful for the time we got to spend together when lockdown was eased over the summer, it is difficult to now go back to having no contact apart from text messages and phone calls. I miss her a lot. We're trying to make the best of it but it is hard. At the same time though it is this light at the end of the tunnel, it's a reason to make sure that we're doing the best we can to get through lockdown and the pandemic and we know that doing our bit to keep infection rates down, wearing masks, washing hands, keeping distances, staying inside as much as we can is gonna help us to be able to see each other as soon as we can.

I've had so many people say to me, you know, 'Robin, how have you managed to land yourself in a relationship with someone that you wanna spend the rest of your life with during a time when people can't see each other and new people can't really meet?' And to be honest I don't really know how I've managed it. But I have and I'm so incredibly grateful that I have done that somehow. And I just want people to know that there is light in every situation and it's hard, I know it's so difficult out there in every part of the world at the moment but if you can find some light to hold onto then there is a promise that this pandemic will be over sooner rather than later if we keep everything crossed and do what we can to ensure that those infection rates stay low.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

Thank you again to everyone who has shared their firsthand experience with us. We know that telling these stories and reliving these experiences isn't easy and we are so, so grateful to you.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah, thank you. We usually wrap up these COVID-19 episodes with a top 5 things that we've learned but we don't really have that for this episode. I think there are so many things that we've learned throughout this pandemic about ourselves and about our relationships and our connection to the world around us. But maybe if there's one thing to take away from this episode or this pandemic even is that every one of us, every person has their own struggles, their own experiences, their own challenges, hopes, fears, dreams, entire lives and remembering that, showing empathy, it's so incredibly important.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, it really, really is. Again thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who for this episode, for all of our episodes, for everyone who wrote in, thank you for sharing your stories with us.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Thank you. Thank you also to Bloodmobile for providing the music for this episode and every one of our episodes.

Erin Welsh

Thank you to everyone who supports us on Patreon, you are amazing. It's unbelievable, thank you.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Thank you also to the Exactly Right network of whom we're very proud to be a part.

Erin Welsh

And thank you to you, listeners, who tune in week after week and listen to us say stuff. It's still remarkable. People wanna hear our voices.

Erin Allmann Updyke

(laughs) Yeah. Yeah, hopefully this was a nice break, hearing everyone else's voices.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, yeah. Well until next time, wash your hands.

Erin Allmann Updyke

You filthy animals.