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Covid-19: Adjusting to a New Reality

The first time I heard about the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was on the news in late January. The headline read "China Battles Coronavirus." Little did I know this "battle" would swiftly and surreptitiously spread across the world, into our own neighborhoods and homes of loved ones. Before the virus made its journey to the US, most people, including myself, shrugged it off as though it was a distant and unlikely threat to our country and people. Within a few weeks, a handful of cases of COVID-19 were discovered in the US, and still my friends, my family and I remained calm given the minimal numbers and perceived rare cases of disease. Within the blink of an eye, 200 COVID-19 cases in the US turned to over 1.4 million cases with over 80,000 deaths! Between March 11th and March 19th a change of events and orders shocked the nation and suddenly intensified the gravity of COVID-19 in America. The NBA and NHL announced an effective suspension to their seasons, Disneyland closed all their parks, the Las Vegas Strip and casinos closed, nonessential stores closed and finally a statewide, stay-at-home order took place, all during the same week. These events rarely, if ever, shut down their daily operations. This resulted in feelings of fear, shock and concern with regards to the seriousness of the virus.

It still feels like I'm in a dream, a horrible dream from which I can not escape and with no end in sight. I wake up every morning hoping that this nightmare will be over, only to realize that this nightmare has become my new reality. It has become second nature for me to regularly check the morning news, optimistic for any light at the end of this dark and scary tunnel. However, the news seems to get worse and more complicated everyday. I keep telling myself "this can't be real" as I continue to stare at the number of increasing deaths caused by the COVID-19. Not only has the virus posed a significant threat to our health, but it has also caused an unprecedented economic disruption, threatening permanent closure to many companies and a record high in unemployment rates, including my father who is one of the over 30 million Americans that have lost their job. It is extremely stressful thinking about whether the money my father has saved will be enough to feed and support a family of five.

The uncertain and tense environment induced by COVID-19 has placed our country on the verge of another healthcare crisis - widespread psychological trauma. The anxiety of how the future will play out, followed by isolation, and reduced social engagement with friends and loved ones carries a significant toll on many individuals and can lead to mass suicide and a rise in mental illness.

This virus has had a huge emotional and physical toll on the lives of my family and I. There is a constant fear and ambiguity of what the future may hold. My father, 67 years old and a diabetic, falls within one of the most vulnerable groups if infected by COVID-19. It is distressing to watch the news and social media, especially when I hear cases of young, healthy individuals losing their battles to the virus. This contagiousness and lethality of the virus have been some of the most anxiety-provoking aspects, as I am scared for the spread of disease to my family and

especially my father. Due to this fear, my mother and two older brothers and I are always cautious about going out of the house and taking every precautionary measure so that we do not put our father at greater risk. This has put a significant strain on me because I stay home at all times, preventing me from doing the things I love like playing basketball, hanging out with my friends and going to the gym. I regularly find myself crying and wishing for all of this to be over.

Being in quarantine at home has also made studying and participating in school more challenging. The current environment makes it extremely stressful and exhausting to sit behind a computer screen for almost six hours a day in order to complete all my work. Additionally, I lack motivation to focus and study at times, with my mind constantly bringing up the chaos across the world. With no idea of what the future holds, my dreams and goals have been paused with no clear end in sight. However, the quarantine is an order and process that I completely support and understand, as it must be done in order to save lives and return to any semblance of normalcy. What keeps me moving forward everyday is my strong family support and a glimmer of optimism for better times ahead..

This pandemic serves as a huge wake up call in life. It brings awareness of the steps our country must take in order to better prepare for future health and economic crises. I question, "What if all ages were highly vulnerable to death from this virus, compared to those ages 60 and over with underlying health conditions?" Just imagine how much more catastrophic this virus could have been and how many more innocent lives it could have taken! Before the pandemic struck, I took so many of my daily experiences for granted, including spending time outside with family and friends, traveling, and attending concerts and sports games just to name a few. In my opinion, I think the pandemic will have a profound effect across the world on how we socially

interact and travel in the future. Social distancing and face mask coverings will be the new normal for years to come. The COVID-19 virus brought to light that we are not well prepared for any novel virus and we have not taken pandemic preparedness seriously. The one thing that I am pleased to see is how we as a whole country and other countries around the world came together cohesively to battle this vicious virus. From health care and frontline workers to every family and individual that complies with the stay-at-home orders, we are all courageously working together to fight the novel coronavirus.

Although the future of the COVID-19 pandemic is inconceivable to predict at this time, we can learn from past pandemics and apply our knowledge here. The COVID-19 is not the first time a virus devastated a population like this. In fact, smallpox in the Americas and its impact on indigenous populations following European invasion parallels what we are facing today. Similar to COVID-19, smallpox is a viral infection that typically penetrates the body through the nose or throat and into the lungs where it builds up and spreads to the lymphatic system. Before European invasion, much of the Americas was scattered and interaction between those populations were limited, restricting the spread of deadly diseases. This is vastly different from the way we interact today, as we are significantly more populated and travel between dense populations takes place regularly. In contrast to the Americas, Europeans lived in close proximity with each other and with an array of domesticated animals from where new diseases got passed on through their food and air. Many epidemic diseases ravished Europe's dense populations, causing devastating waves of disease and death. Eventually, Europe's catastrophic infections declined and immunity improved. The Americas had no prior exposure to any of the viruses and infections the Europeans faced. Spaniards introduced smallpox to the New World

after inadvertently bringing along an African slave who was infected with smallpox. As a result, through basic contact the indigenous people became exposed and quickly infected by the virus, almost wiping them out completely. For the Spaniards, smallpox became an unrecognized, valuable and invisible weapon that helped them defeat the indigenous and conquer land in the Americas.

Currently in year 2020, we as a world are facing what the Native Americans faced more than 500 years ago; a deadly novel virus with no prior exposure. Whether COVID-19 was spread through one person or leaked out through the Wuhan lab goes on to show how something so little can devastate and diminish communities and populations. Since we are at a time where travel has become easier and more accessible to every part of the world, COVID-19 has rapidly made its way around the world. Both the smallpox and COVID-19 are highly infectious diseases that can compromise the body through common contact. Both viruses were introduced in one community before making their way to more communities and eventually to other continents.

Thankfully, because of the advancements of the modern era, we are capable of early detection of the novel virus, how it spreads, how it behaves, and how we can prevent it. The indigenous population that faced the deadly smallpox unfortunately lacked the knowledge, technological advancements and state-of-the-art medicine needed to control the pandemic. Thankfully, naturally occurring smallpox was eradicated worldwide by 1980 and I am more than confident that we as a nation and entire world have the capability to fight COVID-19 and completely destroy the virus in the foreseeable future as well. Sadly, politics is getting in the way of how we dictate and control the coronavirus. A clash in opposing views and turmoil within the

government is the last thing this country needs. This is a time where all of us need to play our parts unitedly and effectively to overcome and get through this ominous time.