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In Sickness and in Health in South Texas: Narratives of COVID's Impact

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Unknown Battles

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For as long as I can remember, I have generally been a pretty positive, “happy-go-lucky” person. Around my family and friends, I am known for being bubbly, giggly, and hopeful, and at work, I have earned the nickname “smiley”. COVID took all of this away from me and made me someone I did not recognize when I looked in the mirror.

In the Fall of 2020, I began my first year of veterinary school at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. Being born and raised in Texas, this was a very large and intimidating move for me to make in the first place. I went from being constantly surrounded by people I loved to moving somewhere where I did not know a single person. Since COVID was still at its height when I started school, it made my first year rather unusual and difficult. All of my classes ended up being virtual and my labs were sparse. For the few labs I did have, we had very limited contact with others. I was actually only allowed to be in contact with 3 other colleagues and that was it. This made socializing and making new friends extremely difficult, or might I say, almost impossible. This caused me great heartache as I am an extremely social being. In addition, because my classes were virtual, I spent probably close to 95% of my time sitting at my desk within the same four walls. The combination between limited human contact and staring at the same walls in my apartment all by myself for months on end left me with no real outlet. I began to fade away.

Before I knew it, I effectively stopped leaving my apartment all together except for my lab obligations. However, even for the obligations I did have, I was late every time because it was hard to force myself to get out of bed. This downward spiral eventually evolved to me no longer exercising, not eating, and not doing my laundry anymore. As time continued, I even began to think that it required too much energy to brush my hair and even brush my teeth every day. I started crying every study break I gave myself. Sometimes, my sobbing was effectively uncontrollable. Unfortunately, I convinced myself that I had to keep it a secret and go through it on my own so that I didn't inconvenience or worry those who cared about me the most. I put on a fake smile and faked a chipper tone over the phone, so no one would question it. Looking back now, they would have had every reason in the world to worry about me. And they should have. I was at rock bottom, in the darkest of places. I couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel. It was the most empty I have ever felt, yet I simultaneously felt consumed and paralyzed by my emotions. It is hard to accurately describe the battle that was going on in my brain.

I believe that this emotional turmoil I experienced was without-a-doubt prompted by the COVID pandemic. What started as probably a simple case of homesickness, was exacerbated exponentially by being isolated from most other human contact. While I recognize that the isolation was initiated with good intent, obviously as a way to prevent the spread of illness to others, the effects it had on my emotional state along with many, many others cannot be disregarded. Personally, I do not think there will come a day that I will ever forget how I felt during my one year of veterinary school because of the affects COVID had on my life. I am a different person now.

It has been two years since I have visited these feelings in depth and what I went through emotionally. Looking back now, I think I actually learned a lot from this experience - both

about myself and about others. In the past two years, I believe I have become a more gracious, patient, and understanding person because of what I went through. I am not as quick to judge others and their actions, because I now realize that they may be battling things we may never know about. Further, just because a person may seem to have it together outwardly, does not necessarily mean that they are not falling apart on the inside like I was. It is sometimes hard to pinpoint these people, people who need some extra support, love, grace, and encouragement, so I feel it is best to offer it to every person I encounter. All in all, if I could sum up what I learned from my COVID experience, it's that life is hard and we are all doing our best, the best we know how, and that is enough.