

What If I Told You the COVID-19 Pandemic Is Not Entirely Bad?

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Is the COVID-19 pandemic entirely bad? Your eyes may be popping out of your head by this statement. What if I told you that this pandemic has allowed me to be a better husband, father, son, citizen, teacher, and residency program director? It has allowed me to speak, teach, and love in ways I have never done before. Previously, death was a very distant concept to this 41-year-old emergency room doctor. This pandemic has brought death to my front door, as this virus is all around me at work. Every time I pull up a chest CT showing those infamous “ground glass opacities,” I say to myself, *I was in that room with that COVID-19 patient and I know I picked up the virus*. Immediately my mind goes to my family at home, hoping I won’t be transporting the virus back to them despite my precautions.

What if I told you I have spent the best quality time of my life with my wife, children, parents, friends, and colleagues at work in these last few weeks? I have been able to reach levels of care, respect, compassion, and, yes, love for others more than any kiss or hug achieved in the past. The social distancing phenomenon has forced me to display my emotions through words, facial expressions, emojis, and body language more than ever.

What if I told you that my feelings of burnout have essentially vanished? With the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education requirements, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services rules and regulations, and hospital protocols adjusted for the pandemic, the practice of medicine has become simpler and easier. We now worry less about computers and paperwork and perform focused patient encounters. This minimizes exposure time in the patient’s room and leads to a sense of freedom—to function as a real emergency physician. We are not constantly being harassed by hospital administration to *dispo, dispo, dispo!* Whether true or false, our vigilance from the constant *fear of being sued* has gone away because of the distraction of this pandemic.

What if I told you the COVID-19 pandemic has made me a better physician? It has taken me out of my usual robotic, mind-numbing Google Calendar and forced me to make more eye contact and communicate more directly. As a program director of an emergency medicine residency, I am now frequently texting, calling, and e-mailing my residents. I ask if there is anything I

can do for them. I would rather they vent and get things off their chests than to let worries resonate in their minds. I have purchased safety glasses as part of the personal protective equipment for my residents to make sure they know I have their back, or eyes for that matter. Residents learn the treatment of diabetic ketoacidosis, sepsis, and pneumothorax from faculty, multiple-choice questions, and books, but where are they going to learn about giving, compassion, and empathy? They need to see these qualities in faculty, especially now.

What if I told you that the COVID-19 pandemic has led me to strengthen my family bonds? I have struggled in the past to teach my children their daily prayers. Since school, karate, and soccer are cancelled, now I can do this. Most nights we sit together for dinner. I encourage them to use *please and thank you* and have family conversations. We have built obstacle courses, bird houses, and done countless crafts that are strengthening our family unit. I have talked to my wife about our future as parents and our relationship with each other, with active listening and without my phone in hand. I call my mom and dad to check in daily. I have realized that my parents are getting older, and it’s not a far-fetched idea that one day they could be gone. I have reestablished relationships with extended family that I haven’t spoken to in a long time.

What if I told you the COVID-19 pandemic has been a revelation? I am aware of my mortality more than ever before. I fully realize that I am only temporarily here on earth. Exposure to HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C used to be the main fears while working in the emergency room. These have taken a distant second place to COVID-19. Whether it is the realization that *life is short* or that death could be right around the corner, I am peeling off a stale shell and exposing a new self.

And I say to myself, *I should have been doing these things all along*.



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