

Transplant Survivor - Surviving COVID-19

I never imagined that a little piece of fabric with two elastic loops could bring back such a powerful feeling of déjà vu.

Surviving COVID-19 by Peter Gordon

I reached into the far corners of the cabinet and felt around for the little box. There it was! I pulled it out. It was still half-full

after all these years. I took out one of the masks.



A shudder rippled through me. I never imagined

that a little piece of fabric with two elastic loops could bring back such a powerful feeling of déjà vu.

My mind flashed back 11 ½ years, to the doctors and nurses and attendants hovering over my hospital bed during my transplant stay, their faces always hidden behind masks. And then to the months afterward, when a face mask became a standard part of my wardrobe, a fragile line of defense protecting my weakened immune system from the threats all around. I recalled the sideward glances and double takes when I ventured out in public...

I pulled out a few masks and placed them on the table in Mary Ann's temporary new "bedroom" in the den, along with some rubber gloves and sanitizer. Ever since I'd heard that she was going to make a run for it and fly home from Germany, I'd been working feverishly to divide our condo into two separate living quarters. Because of the raging Coronavirus crisis, her international travel, and my off-the-charts high risk factors, we would have to remain totally separated from each other for at least two weeks. This was going to be interesting.

It was an unusual homecoming. My heart jumped with joy and relief when I finally saw Mary Ann enter the baggage claim area, but all I could do was wave from behind my mask. Then came our odd dance of distance and caution as we settled into our separate quarters at home, getting used to our new precautions and routines.

The entry hallway in our apartment became a no-man's-land between our two worlds. We named it the DMZ (after the demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea). Neither of us ventured near the DMZ without a mask and gloves. All of our communication was either across this buffer zone or via text. The kitchen was in my territory, so food and dishes were my job. I'd set her meals on a table in the DMZ, then back away while she picked them up. We reversed the process when she was done with the dishes. There was much hand washing before and after each exchange.

It was actually sort of a fun challenge for a couple days. But then, on Mary Ann's third day home, she said her throat and lungs felt as if she'd inhaled something burning. Soon afterward she started complaining of a headache and sore muscles. Then shivering and chills. Her temperature spiked. She curled up on the sofa bed and couldn't get up. My heart sank. Was it just a bad case of the flu, or the dreaded Covid-19? It was excruciating to have to keep my distance – I couldn't take her temperature, or wipe her feverish forehead with a wet cloth, or hold her hand, or anything.

The next morning she was feeling miserable and couldn't eat anything except a piece of toast. We called her doctor and explained her symptoms. They said to bring her in for testing. She somehow managed to get up and make it to the car on her own – I couldn't help her. She huddled under a blanket in the back seat. I pulled into the testing lab parking lot. A technician came out wearing full haz-mat gear and helmet – she looked like an astronaut. We rolled down the rear window and she tested Mary Ann right there, inserting a long Q-tip type swab into her nose. It took about five seconds.

When we got home, Mary Ann collapsed in bed for the night. The next day the TV was on in the background - one of the morning news shows was playing a clip of some folks claiming that the Coronavirus scare was nothing more than a media-driven hoax. That's when the phone rang. It was Mary Ann's doctor, giving us the news that she had tested positive. Some hoax! Suddenly it was real.

How could I take care of her and somehow keep myself safe at the same time? I'd never been so focused and "deliberate" in my life – conscious of every move, every breath, everything I touched, constantly sanitizing everything. Just for the heck of it, I put a notepad near the kitchen sink and make a checkmark every time I washed my hands. By early evening there were 37 checkmarks, and I gave up keeping track.

The next day my doctor called – knowing my compromised immune system and other vulnerabilities, especially my weakened lungs, she wanted *me* to get tested. I drove back to the testing site. For some reason, they didn't do it in the parking lot this time, but instead walked me inside through a narrow hallway and sat me in a big exam chair. The swab up my nose was a bit uncomfortable but over in no time.

The next day the results came back negative! Whew! By all accounts, Mary Ann's infection was now past the peak contagious period, so apparently our extreme separation precautions had worked. I never realized how much anxiety was bottled up inside until that test result came back – I cried with relief. But this was no time to let down our guard.

On the morning of the 4th day, Mary Ann asked for something other than toast for breakfast. Her fever started declining. Her humor returned. All encouraging signs. The trend continued for several more days – she gained energy bit by bit. As she passed the critical three-days-with-no-fever benchmark, we started breathing a little easier.



On the morning of day 7, I heard some music playing across the DMZ. Mary Ann had put her laptop

on the floor and was dancing to Donna Summer's "I Will Survive!" Then she switched to The Village People and gestured for me to join her. We started dancing to "YMCA" together, trying unsuccessfully to shadow each other across the DMZ – two middle aged goofballs with terrible rhythm and embarrassingly poor dance moves, laughing and celebrating together...

The celebration didn't last long. That afternoon my throat started feeling sore. Then my entire windpipe. Then headache, dizziness, fatigue. I collapsed on the bed. My fever spiked. It was all happening so fast. I flashed back to the month after my transplant, when a dangerous intestinal infection called C-Difficile brought me to the edge of death's door. Could something similar be happening again? I tried to stay calm on the outside, but fear was churning within.

Suddenly our roles switched – Mary Ann became my caretaker, just as she'd done so brilliantly 11 ½ years before. Her infection was beyond the danger zone so she could now approach my bedside more closely, but we were still very careful. She brought me tea and snacks and took my temperature what seemed like every five minutes.

When my doctor heard my new symptoms, she wanted me to get tested again. I guess you get special attention when

you're a transplant survivor. So the next day I managed to pull myself together and drove back to the testing center. The results came back later and confirmed what we already suspected: I was now positive for Covid-19! Reality hit again.

I remained flat in bed for the next two days, sleeping most of the time. Mary Ann kept me well hydrated and fed – for some reason, I never lost my appetite. My fever remained elevated, but it never spiked to dangerous levels. Aside from fever, my greatest concern was my lungs, but my coughing was mild and my breathing remained OK. Our super-affectionate cat Gizmo was in heaven – he remained curled up next to me the whole time.

I ended up following almost the exact same pattern as Mary Ann did with her Covid infection a week earlier: On Day 4 my fever broke. The next few days saw a gradual improvement – a little wobbly and lightheaded at times, but better overall. On day 8, after I passed the three-days-with-no-fever-or-major-symptoms milestone, the doctors confirmed that I was out of the woods. I breathed a deep sigh of relief, and the oxygen never felt sweeter...

Mary Ann and I have returned to our evening walks along the harbor in recent days, wearing our masks and practicing social distancing of course. Savoring the fresh air and reflecting on yet another healthcare odyssey together. Just as with my transplant so many years ago, we've emerged with a renewed sense of appreciation. Appreciation for our good fortune – it could have been so much worse, especially for me. (Our hearts go out to the many others in less fortunate circumstances). Appreciation for our wonderful healthcare providers. Appreciation for the grocery bags left outside our door and countless other gestures of kindness from friends near and far. Appreciation for life's simple pleasures like preparing a meal side by side or strolling along the shore together. And most of all, appreciation for each other as spouse, caregiver, and life partner.



Language
English

Contact Us

Blood & Marrow Transplant Information Network (BMT InfoNet)
1548 Old Skokie Road Highland Park, IL 60035

Phone: 847-433-3313
Toll-free: 888-597-7674

help@bmtinfonet.org

BMT InfoNet is a 501(c)(3) organization. Make your tax deductible contribution today: [Donate](#)

© 2018 BMT Infonet. All rights reserved.

Source URL: <https://www.bmtinfonet.org/story/transplant-survivor-surviving-covid-19>