The Impact of the Pandemic on My Life as a Nursing Student

It was a Wednesday in my second year of college. Wednesday, March 11, 2020, to be exact. I was sitting in Starbucks with my roommate while we were on Spring Break and working on a project when we got the notification that UVA would extend its spring break and move classes online for the foreseeable future due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was on this day that my life got turned completely upside down.

The following week, I had to move home from my apartment in Charlottesville and back into my childhood bedroom in Richmond. In addition to this move, I also had to change my summer job plans. Though I had hoped to work as a patient care technician at a hospital, I quickly found out that many healthcare systems were on a hiring freeze, and there was no way they were going to take on an untrained PCT amidst everything that was going on. As a result, I ended up working as a nanny for a family in Richmond.

As the end of summer rolled around and it was time to go back to school, I felt ready. Though I knew the semester would be anything but normal, I was excited to come back to Charlottesville and see my friends and engage in learning activities. My first semester back amidst the pandemic involved many Zoom classes, multiple saliva screenings, and a lot of food taken to go! Still, in spite of these changes, I feel fortunate to say that I was able to go back into the clinical setting. Though I had to be masked at all times, I loved being able to interact with real patients again, and to really remember why I wanted to go into nursing in the first place.

At the end of the semester, I packed my bags and went home. Because of the concern for spreading germs, the university asked everyone to stay home from Thanksgiving through Christmas and until after the new year. I felt sad that I wouldn’t be able to have a “Friends-giving” meal with my roommates or celebrate Christmas with my friends at a formal or other type of function. Nonetheless, I accepted what had to be, and when January rolled around, I was offered the chance to receive the Covid-19 vaccine. I felt honored and blessed to have this opportunity, and despite some initial muscle aches and pain, the experience of receiving the shot was a positive one overall. Four weeks later, I received my second dose of the shot. Though that shot wreaked much more havoc on my body in the form of a fever, intestinal distress, a headache, and pain, it was all over within 36 hours, and for that, I am thankful. 36 hours of discomfort is much better than dealing with having Covid-19.

In considering all of these experiences, it is clear that a lot has happened in my life since the beginning of the pandemic, and events have unfolded in a myriad of socially-distanced ways.

I responded to the pandemic at first with sadness and loneliness, but later with hope. I know that as a result of this pandemic, my life will never again be the same. The pandemic has taken so much away from so many people, and for that I am frustrated and upset. However, in that negativity, and in that darkness, I am working hard to find the light and to find a reason to have hope. With hope, I truly believe that good things can prosper, and it is my desire that things will get better and the world will turn a new leaf. Until then, I will work to focus on myself, prioritize schoolwork, and try to strengthen my relationships with my family and friends. The only way forward is through, so, I know I have to keep pushing and keeping hoping. There are better days to come.

All that said, I think I found myself playing the role of caretaker and counselor throughout the pandemic. My friends and family shared with me concerns and worries, and I also found myself beginning to take care of my younger siblings again, now that I was back at home.

I think that given the circumstances, I reacted in the way I did to this pandemic because in a time where so much was unknown, I found comfort in falling back into old habits of caretaking, counseling, and listening to others. It was easier for me to focus on other people and their worries than to stop and think about how I was feeling or what I was worried about.

As aforementioned, though I felt anxious, worried, and upset at times, I also felt hopeful. I was hopeful that the healthcare workers would get the support they needed, that the vaccine efforts would roll out smoothly, and so much more.

That said, I think resilient is a good word to use when I also consider my responses and feelings and how they evolved as events evolved. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were so many unknowns. Now, however, we have sort of adjusted to life in a pandemic, and I feel slightly less worried about the health and wellbeing of those around me.

In terms of experiences I have had in the past that have shaped my understanding and response of today, I think the closest comparison I have to how I feel about the pandemic now was the confusion I felt during the 2009 swine flu pandemic. At that time, I did not know much about what was going on; I didn’t understand why we were getting what I was told was a second flu shot, or why we had to get the shot at the Richmond International Raceway with hundreds of other people instead of at the pediatrician. Fortunately, I’ve grown up since then, and I have a lot more perspective on the situation and an understanding of pandemics and their implications in general.

In terms of if any experiences in nursing school have affected how I have viewed what has happened or how I have responded to what is happening, I would say that developing a better understanding of the social determinants of health and their impacts has really opened my eyes to inequities that exist and are only made worse by the pandemic. Similarly, I think learning about the importance of population health has really helped me to understand why we cannot just look at individuals and individual sickness. Rather, we must consider the whole community and get the whole picture. In other words, I know that when one person gets sick, it has a trickle-down effect and can impact many individuals. I also know that access to healthcare is another key component that is related to this pandemic.

In terms of my beliefs about the role of nursing in situations like this, I would say that nurses are absolutely critical. In considering the ICU and hospital settings, I know that a lot of times, nurses have been the ones going in to check on patients who have Covid-19, and the doctors sometimes won’t even go into the room in order to preserve PPE. Clearly, the bedside care provided by nurses is critical. That said, I think that nurses as leaders and educators also have an important role to play in this pandemic in the sense that they need to urge people to follow public health guidelines, and they can also work to dispel myths about the pandemic and about the vaccine.

All that said, though I already touched on some of the impacts of the pandemic on my life, I want to also shed light more specifically on some of the more objectively positive and negative impacts. I loved being able to slow down and hang out with the children I nannied. I loved spending extra time with my family and really having the opportunity to deepen my relationships with them. I loved eating take-out food in my pajamas on my couch instead of having to get ready to go out. Of course, I also felt lonely and isolated at times. I felt angry at my peers for not following public health guidelines. I felt frustrated that I couldn’t have my normal college experience. Clearly, there are good and bad outcomes from this pandemic, but, like I mentioned earlier, I have to focus on the good.

In terms of stresses I’ve had as I’ve responded to or helped others, I would say communication is a big concern. It is hard to communicate with people when you are so isolated and socially distant. However, I am doing the best I can with the energy and resources I have available.

In conclusion, I think my actions during this pandemic have matched my values. I have very much “walked the walk”, in the sense that I have followed public health guidelines and have listened to science. Altogether, my experiences from this pandemic will affect me moving forward in that they will encourage me to never waste a single moment, to tell people how I feel, and to always work to consider the greater good whenever I think about my actions and how they might affect other people. I have learned so much from this experience, but perhaps most importantly, I have learned to prioritize my relationships and to not sweat the small things. I feel as though the only thing left for me to do is to continue to encourage people to follow public health guidelines and urge people to get vaccinated if they can and have not already.

All in all, I am excited to be a part of the change, and I look forward to doing what I can to stop this pandemic and help people become healthier.