

I am writing this in May, mental health awareness month...and we should be aware. Last night, I watched an emotional video on Facebook of a father telling the story of how the virus took his 12-year-old son. His son wasn't infected with the virus, he had taken his life. At the beginning of this, mental health wasn't the discussion regarding social isolation, people were mainly concerned with their physical health and safety. People who never knew they were struggling may be affected. We haven't experienced anything like this before and that can bring up unseen emotions and thoughts. Humans live by social interaction, we could not survive without it. I am lucky enough to be under the same roof as my family during the quarantine. I feel for the people who are all alone right now, do not have a roof over their head or have a family to be with, and the people who have lost their job.

Today I met a wholesome elderly woman. I started working for a service called Instacart where I buy groceries for people who cannot get exposed to the virus. When I dropped off the groceries, she came outside to check everything and say hi. She was excited to see me and because it was a beautiful day out, so she could work on her garden outside. This virus is mainly killing the elderly and this interaction reminded me of how special this group of people is to humanity. They are the wisest people on earth and are typically so grateful for every small thing. Something I constantly hear is how this virus is "only killing old people, so it's not as bad". Yet some don't even realize how special and important this group of people is. Almost every day now, I see a post on Instagram or Facebook about the loss of someone 65 and older. Our grandparents are dying. We have come too far with modern medicine to just be okay with a whole population being killed off.

Wherever I go, mask on. Almost everyone around me has one on. If you don't wear a mask inside a public area, you run the risk of being harassed or getting into a fight over it. When

Awareness and Pandemic Experiences

I first started working for Instacart, I went to a local Big Y grocery store and ended up spending hours there because I was not used to the new job and I had picked up a large order. This was my first experience wearing a mask. I discovered that wearing a mask increases the likelihood of experiencing anxiety because you cannot take deep breaths in. I wouldn't call myself someone with an anxiety disorder, but I tend to freak out a lot under pressure or when things aren't going right. I found myself short of breath and frankly almost passed out. An increase in anxiety ultimately suppresses the immune system too. Are we still unaware?

When I'm walking past someone in a store or see someone I know, I usually smile at them as a way of greeting them and being friendly. When I am in the grocery store, I find that I still smile at everyone I pass by because I do it naturally, but I forget that they cannot see beneath the mask. Certain human connections are unavailable at this time.

We have Zoom. Our classes are conducted on zoom and our social interactions. I am so grateful that we live in the generation of technology and we were able to finish up our classes, instead of missing a full semester. I'm grateful that we have FaceTime and texting, so friends and family can stay connected in some form. We can still check in on each other and get a few laughs in. Let me tell you, it gets a little old living in the same house as your family for months with nowhere to go! We are so fortunate to have these resources; however, no matter how much work professors put into lesson plans, it will still never be the same. When you are in a real class or having a conversation with someone in person, you cannot see yourself, just the person you have your attention on. With Zoom, you can see your video, your classmates' video, and your professor, so maybe you're not always focusing on what you normally would if you were just sitting in a classroom. The interaction aspect of zoom is not the same as well. We do not have a true face-to-face connection. One thing I have noticed when I do group zoom calls with my

friends or my teammates is there is no such thing as a side conversation. When you're in a big group of people, it is typical to see side conversation before an activity has begun and that is how you build a personal connection with people. We may not find that again for a while.

No matter how much we look into the statistics of this and try to predict what will happen next, it is impossible to predict the future entirely. Many public health officials knew that we wouldn't be prepared for the next pandemic, America didn't have the support it needed. I constantly find myself making plans for "whenever this is all over" and looking forward to the fall semester and my favorite running season, cross country, but I do not know when the end will be. There may not even be a true "end" because there is no guarantee that we find a safe and effective vaccine or that the disease will be eradicated. I think it is comforting to hold onto hope and be excited about the future, but no one truly knows the timeline.

The last "normal" week we had was midterms week. Everyone was looking forward to spring break and their vacation plans. I remember the flow of that week perfectly. In the beginning, COVID-19 wasn't a huge fear. As the days went by, the NCAA started canceling sports seasons and the emotions heightened. The seniors didn't get to finish out their athletic careers; there were many tears. Colleges began to declare going online and having extended spring breaks. On that Thursday night, friends got together and stayed up late. We had our last moments together for the semester and didn't even know it. Everything was very uncertain that night. We cried, and we laughed. Then, we hugged goodbye. I have truly learned to never take any moment, any opportunity, or any friendship for granted because I learned the hard way, you never know when it will be gone.