

## Whether it's cancer or COVID-19, the disconnects are the same

By Roberta Martone Pavia

When the world came to an unprecedented halt courtesy of the coronavirus, my family was that small minority celebrating. Sort of. Just as the pandemic hit, we got the results of our daughter's PET scan after almost two years of wrestling with a Hodgkin's Lymphoma diagnosis. The scan came back clear, and we were euphoric.

However, as soon as we got into our car after leaving the oncologist's office, our 19-year-old burst into tears. "Are you kidding me? What now? What if I get the virus? What if I die from the *virus* instead of lymphoma?" The questions were grimly ironic. It was an all-too-familiar scenario that brought us back to the previous year when Justine was quarantined after her STEM cell transplant. It didn't matter that she had successfully overcome regimens of chemo, radiation, immunotherapy, and the transplant. Never mind that she had already bested a two-month house quarantine, missed long-planned trips with friends, and delayed her freshman year at college. Despite having successfully navigated those obstacles, our daughter was now worried about the possibility of contracting a deadly virus after having battled cancer, and she was petrified.

I tried to console Justine, reminding her how she had already been through something similar. "You've got this," I said. "You know what it's like to be isolated from everyone but mom and dad. At least now you won't be the only one who is stuck inside."

I recalled how what seemed impossible soon became routine last winter: spraying and wiping down every surface with anti-bacterial solution, pouring bleach down every drain, wearing gloves every time we touched food. Receiving care packages on our doorstep—our only means of appreciation a muffled "thank you" through the mail slot. As a family, we all felt the disconnect of not being allowed to dine out at restaurants, order take-out food from our favorite burrito place, or eat homemade baked goods from friends who just wanted to offer comfort. We were experiencing a kind of isolation none of us had dealt with before. However, back then, we also knew it was temporary.

When Justine was finally allowed to have friends over, those visits took on a routine of their own, too. We had to make sure her friends weren't harboring colds or flus and insist they wore gloves and masks. They couldn't eat or drink anything, had to stop by in small groups, and keep their visits brief. After a few awkwardly humorous moments, for instance, when Haley couldn't figure out how to put on the surgical mask, or Sophie discovered her hands wouldn't fit into the disposable gloves because they were much larger than the average teen, her friends connected, solidifying a bond that in some cases had been forged back in pre-school. For others, it was the cementing of relationships that began in high school. Classmates, dance team members, and friends from the Italian Exchange Program at Newton North.

I welcomed the bursts of laughter that erupted from our family room during those visits and tried not to listen in like a nosy mom. From the snippets I did overhear, I learned that their conversation, too, was pretty routine. They talked about the stuff many 19-year-olds talk about: college, clothes, boys, girls, parties. Even with the requisite facemasks, they found ways to communicate. Those conversations about normal everyday things were part of what got Justine, and us, through a tumultuous time.

Today, it's a consolation of sorts that we have been able to adopt those same routines to help us stay connected during COVID-19. Seven-plus weeks into the pandemic, all of us are learning how to find new and unusual ways to reach out—virtually, vicariously, and at a distance. Just as we did with friends and family during our daughter's cancer treatment. Once COVID-19—and our struggle with Hodgkin's Lymphoma—is behind us, our hope is that some good will come out of these unprecedented times. That we'll have discovered new ways to connect with each other. And, that these new connections will somehow make us better, stronger, and ready to move forward into the new normal.

*Roberta Martone Pavia is a freelance writer from Newton, MA, who writes about parenting, education, and home decor.*