

Fear of COVID

Category: COVID Redux

written by Lewis Mehl-Madrona | June 5, 2024

Penny was enraged when she learned that we were no longer wearing masks at our hospital. "That's murder," she said. "Everyone should wear a mask at all times."

I explained that I was following the advice of our infectious disease experts. There are downsides to masks: They make communication and patient assessment more difficult, especially in psychiatry. It's harder to build rapport when we can't see each other's faces.

"You're killing people," she replied.

I said I hadn't seen anyone with COVID in over a year, though I knew it still existed, just like RSV and the flu. That didn't satisfy her.

Penny wore a mask at all times, even in her home. Anyone who entered her home had to don a hazmat suit, an N-95 mask, and booties over their shoes. Needless to say, few entered her home. Penny didn't go to the dentist because the receptionist didn't wear a mask. She stopped going to her cardiologist because he didn't wear a mask in the office. She was convinced COVID was related to HIV and that people could get HIV from COVID.

Penny brought me face-to-face with fear of illness, fear of death. To what lengths do we go to avoid illness? To what lengths do we go to avoid death?

In the middle of winter, my dog took after a deer, whipping me around. Though I was wearing Yaktrax crampons, I still went down on the ice, dislocating my shoulder. It was a difficult posterior reduction and a slow recovery, giving me new respect for the hazards of falling on ice. I began to assess risk differently. I vowed to drive five miles an hour slower in inclement weather than I had. I became more afraid of large trucks whipping past at breakneck speed, spraying ice, snow, or rain onto my windshield and temporarily obstructing my view. Penny made me realize I was more afraid of traffic on I-95 than of COVID—but I live in Maine. People here were livid when they were told to stay six feet apart. That's much too close, they said. We didn't have the horrors of New York City, London, or Paris. Plus, I limit my news-watching to small bites that I can digest. Too many vivid images of trauma are bad for my sleep.

Am I in denial? Is Penny right? When does fear of death stop us from living?

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