

Being Human

Category: COVID-19

written by Joe Amaral | April 22, 2020

I work as an ambulance paramedic. Nowadays, on every call that meets the criteria for COVID-19, my colleagues and I wear masks, gloves, eye shields and gowns. We stand six feet away from our patients as we interrogate them about the presence of fever, cough, body aches, or breathing problems.

Our overall 9-1-1 volume is down, as people stay home instead of driving drunk, as they decide to stay away from hospitals, as most of them (minus the over-advertised outliers) shelter in place. But I notice more secondary symptoms: domestic abuse, assault, anxiety, mental illness, loss of sobriety.

The call that has stuck with me came from an addict who had fallen off the proverbial wagon. When we arrived, he was lying on the sidewalk with concerned neighbors and friends surrounding him. Very candidly, the man told me he had been too stressed out: the rehab centers were closed and online AA meetings just weren't the same. He felt ashamed and ostracized, a failure. (I was surprised to learn that AA is not an essential service.)

I told him that a lot of people are back on antidepressants, having dark moments, making isolation exceptions for that one person or family member they really need to see. I counseled a little flexibility. A little understanding for people's tiny cheats. It's hard when all you see are chipper social media posts that prop up the façade that we're all okay. It's hard when you're a recovering alcoholic who now needs a couple of drinks.

I told him that we in the health-care field see what this virus is doing, even if it seems as if some regions have lower rates of infection (a function partly of lack of testing and partly of the obvious success of physical distancing). As we go about our work, we must remain as invisible as antibodies, sans fanfare.

I told him I understood that for some people who get COVID, it's not just a slight fever. I told him that lives, not the economy, are what's worth protecting. People over profit. I told him that he is doing the best he can. He has friends, family and a new path ahead of him.

In these scary times, I told him, we are never alone. I was with him for only twenty minutes, but instead of lecturing him, I supported him and simply said I believe in him.

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