

To Be (Alone) or Not To Be ...

Category: COVID-19

written by Jessica Bloom-Foster | April 12, 2020

I got home this morning after my third 24-hour shift this week covering labor and delivery and newborns for our family medicine service, tired from only three to four hours of sleep. I put on my face mask in the car, came through the front door, where my husband had left a thermos of coffee, ignored the whines of our puppy who wanted to greet me, and went directly to our bedroom, where I have been self-isolating at home for six days now.

I had changed out of my scrubs at the hospital, but I now threw all my clothes straight into the wash and took an immediate shower. My husband left breakfast for me by the bedroom door. We texted our check-ins about work (from me) and the kids (from him) and about how much we miss physical contact.

I know some permutation of this reality is going on for countless physicians and other health-care workers across the country. Some are self-decontaminating as best they can in their garages but still physically connecting with their families if they are asymptomatic, but many, fearing possible asymptomatic (or presymptomatic) viral shedding, are living separated lives for an unknown duration.

It's bleak and almost unbearable, this awful calculation of risk so many of us are trying to make on so little information. Can I be sure this will protect my family, or am I just inflicting more emotional and psychological harm on them and myself? The bleakness is compounded by the lack of a clear endpoint, by the lack of clarity that this is the best way—the only way, the safest way—to do things. It's just what we're doing.

I'm motivated by the fear of my husband ending up in an ICU on a ventilator, of my kids getting sick, of feeling I could have prevented it. But knowing this is nothing compared to what so many others are doing and experiencing compounds my guilt with helpless despondency.

Tomorrow, I start seven days of inpatient hospital work, just as the surge is starting in our hospital—our count of COVID-19 patients jumped this weekend from one to a probable eight. I will wear my mask continuously, clean my hands scrupulously, try to physically distance when I can, and don and doff the recommended PPE for every patient encounter. Then every night, I'll come home and see my family only in passing and on a screen.

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