

# The Year of Living Stressfully

This is a time of year when many of us look back on the events that have unfolded over the previous 12 months, reflect, and take stock of our lives. The process usually inspires emotions ranging from sadness and regret to joy and pride. If I had to summarize 2020 in one word, however, I would choose *stressful*. Never in my lifetime have I experienced such a palpable sense that the human race is under attack. There are always parts of the world where people's lives are at risk, whether from natural disasters, war, or poverty, but a worldwide health crisis such as we've experienced in 2020? We haven't seen anything like this in more than a hundred years. I've read historical accounts of worldwide plagues but never considered them a real possibility for this era—at least not on the scale of COVID-19—because of advances in sanitation, medicine, and technology. Man, was I wrong.

Early on, as cases skyrocketed in the Northeast, those of us elsewhere in the country watched in shock as hospitals filled past capacity, health care providers were left without basic personal protective equipment, and refrigerated trucks were needed to handle the overflow of dead bodies. Residents of New York and neighboring states were instructed to spend most of their time at home, and we saw busy city streets emptied out and schools and businesses closed. Even crime slowed down temporarily. In other parts of the country, early restrictions on work, travel, and socializing helped to slow the spread of the virus, at least for a while. Still, our medical and epidemiologic experts warned us of more waves to come. Indeed, as I write this letter in mid-November, the United States is seeing approximately 150,000 cases and more than 700 deaths per day from the virus. More than 70,000 people are currently hospitalized and nearly one-quarter of a million people have died.

It was easy enough for me to get used to donning a mask as needed in everyday life. I was pleased to see the CDC recently conclude that cloth masks protect the user as well as others, which should serve as a further incentive for people to wear a mask. Although I have not found wearing a mask to be a hardship, I believe that social distancing has had a tremendous effect on our collective psyche. Virtually every aspect of our society has been upended by the need for social distancing: work, school, shopping, eating, exercising, and socializing. The

effects have burdened us all, but especially the poor, who have been hurt the most financially, and women, who have been shouldering additional family responsibilities while experiencing disproportionate unemployment. As this pandemic has taken more lives, it has hit more of us at home, or closer to home. By now, many of us know someone, directly or indirectly, who has died of COVID-19, which makes the fear and reality of this pandemic personal.

Fortunately, real solutions lie ahead, and we are already seeing highly encouraging study results regarding vaccine efficacy. Although we cannot afford to become complacent regarding other measures to prevent transmission, we can finally see a light at the end of the tunnel. As a physician, I have never felt prouder of our industrial, academic, community, and administrative leaders, who have come together to cooperate collectively in the mission to develop, test, and disseminate new preventatives and treatments for this infection. Our jobs will not be over after we have controlled this infection for good, however. It will be necessary to deal with the chronic stress of 2020, and heal together as a community, before our lives are restored fully.

Ironically, some positive developments have come out of this ordeal, at least for those of us who have fared relatively well (in regard to finances and health). Our social communication, through web-based media, has opened up access to all kinds of interactions that would not be possible otherwise. Because less time is spent on travel and commuting, our lives have slowed down as we spend much more time at home. I have also found that people in my local community are taking more time to walk and talk with their neighbors. The world has gone back in time to a lifestyle that was in some ways less stressful, something that I hope will stay with us even after the pandemic ends. We may need that lifestyle more than ever as we recover in 2021.

Sincerely,



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