



An “Exhausting” Experience

One woman’s journey through the pandemic and long COVID



Two years into the pandemic, we wanted to hear how women across the globe are doing. We invited more than a dozen women to share their stories, including Yusra Benhalim, who has a background in psychiatry and is senior national medical director at Optum. She told us how COVID-19 affected her personally and what she has observed in her professional role during a time she called “exhausting” and “relentless.”

What has been your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As a psychiatrist, I got to see the significant impact COVID-19 was having on our communities across the country during the pandemic. I had, and continue to have, the honor of trying to find ways we can lift each other up, help people improve their well-being, and live the full, healthy lives they deserve. As the pandemic unfolded, I saw the number of people struggling with substance use, depression, anxiety, unsafe thoughts and loss continue to rise. I saw the huge toll it took on children and adolescents as well as their families. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Personally, with my own family, my responsibilities grew. I have my mom with me, and she’s a little bit older. The pandemic made it much harder for me to tackle the day-to-day tasks of grocery shopping, doing errands, getting medical appointments for her and taking care of everything while I was working full time. Everything shifted into a responsibility that I now had to meet, and meet in a way that was safe from COVID. It was all very different than life as we knew it pre-COVID.

A big part of my pandemic experience was when I got very sick from COVID myself. It happened at the end of March 2020 before people even believed COVID existed or had any idea it was in my state. I was sick for about six weeks with symptoms I had never had before. Then, not anticipating anything after that, I ended up developing long-haul COVID. That has had an even longer-lasting impact than the initial COVID infection. My health and my body have sort of never been the same since then.

10–20%

of people with COVID-19 develop prolonged symptoms.¹

How has long-haul COVID impacted your life?

I've always been very athletic, and exercise was sort of like my lifelong therapy. It got me through med school, through all my medical training, and it's something that I truly, truly enjoyed. Ever since I had COVID, I've really been unable to have the physical stamina and endurance that I had my whole life. My breathing is different now. It sounds like something small, but movement was a big part of my daily life. It was my primary coping skill. It was a way that I kept my body healthy. And it was really something that was important for my mental and emotional well-being. ... There are days where I still kind of struggle with catching my breath or experience this persistent fatigue. I think a lot of people are just trying to push through at times after having COVID and developing long-haul COVID. We need ongoing education and research to help us understand more about this condition and how it impacts our health and our lives. I am privileged to be an advocate for those struggling with long-haul COVID, and I hope that they know they are not alone in their experience, and that they deserve to have support throughout their journey.

During this time, you balanced your own health, work and supporting your mother. Do you see that COVID has impacted men and women differently in terms of roles or responsibilities?

Yes, I think as a country we have seen more women leave the workforce to be a primary caregiver at home, either to their children or other dependents. Although men and women share many roles, when we started to hear more news and statistics about women leaving their careers, it became more apparent that the pandemic was not taking an equal toll on men and women in the workforce. As individuals we all react to change and stress differently, so there's no one-size-fits-all experience simply based on gender. When we look a little closer, though, we can see a change in trends. It's likely that related to all the changes during the pandemic, women are now facing symptoms of depression and anxiety. We saw shifts in drinking patterns, virtual happy hours and "quarantinis" being glamorized online and normalized as a way to cope. I think a lot of women were struggling with carrying the weight of all the responsibilities that fell on them, the sacrifices they made, leaving their careers and potentially turning to substances like alcohol as a way to cope.

Now, that's not to say that men don't also face those struggles. A lot of people, men and women, lost their jobs. But we know that how men cope and how men show their struggles might be different than how women do. There may be many men in the country who are struggling but don't necessarily speak up and reach out for help due to stigma. They may not feel they have a safe space to be vulnerable and let people know what they are going through. ... My hope is that we can continue to break down stigmas for all. That we can get to a day where we open the door for anyone who is in need to say, "I'm struggling and I need help." I also hope that we embrace the chance to help them in ways that meet them where they are, on their own terms.

2x

Depression is twice as common for women as it is for men.²

+25%

The pandemic triggered a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.³

Have you seen people seeking more support or an increase in awareness about mental health during the pandemic?

One of the best things about the pandemic is that we saw so many more people reaching out and connecting with behavioral health care. These are individuals who had never identified as having a mental health or substance use disorder before, and they were reaching out for the very first time for care – whether that was connecting with a therapist, with a doctor or psychiatrist, or going to a hospital. Nowadays we just have so many more people reaching out for help. I'm happy that we are breaking down the stigma against behavioral health and people are finally stepping forward. We also saw people who were already connected to treatment before the pandemic reaching out for care more frequently. For example, people started going to therapy more often than before. In a way, as the stressors of the pandemic got greater, people were able to dial up the support and care they needed.

What have you learned about yourself during this time?

I thought I was a very patient person, and I was in many ways, but the last few years have really called on me to dig deeper than ever. I think I've also learned that I'm not as accepting as I thought I was. I really had to learn to accept the things I cannot control with a new level of mindfulness. I had to reflect on who I am, who I want to be and how I live my life. So that's been a very good learning experience for me, and it's a way I've learned to practice compassion toward myself. You know, I'm human too, and even as a psychiatrist it's OK to have rough patches come every now and then.

I'm a bit of an introvert, which is kind of ironic given that I became a physician, and more specifically a psychiatrist. As an introvert, I have learned a lot of skills over the years on how to connect with people, and mostly from the perspective of how to connect with them to help them, to be of service to them. I think one thing that's been very humbling during my last two years is the power of those connections to lift myself up – to be able to connect with other people, to put myself first at times, and to be on the receiving end of the value of good relationships. I think we all need a village, both locally and globally. We, in an ideal world, would really look out for each other and genuinely care about the well-being of one another. No matter the differences in our life paths, our cultures and our geography, ideally we would all be unified by a sense of community with one another.

How are you feeling as you look to the future?

I think one of the most important things I've learned is to have no expectations, no timeline. It's great to have a bucket list and be optimistic about the future. But I have really come to a place where I don't have any expectations or perhaps I've just come to expect the unexpected. To expect that things will keep changing, and be able to accept that with grace and compassion. One of my patients many years ago told me not to take things one day at a time because that can be too hard at times. They told me to instead take them just a "half a day at a time." I'm so grateful for the gift they gave me with this perspective. Never have I understood the wisdom of those words as much as I do now.

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Hear from other women about how the pandemic affected their lives.

Watch the video at optumeap.com.

Take time to check in on how you're doing

If the pandemic has been stressful for you – or you're experiencing other tough situations or mental health concerns – reach out for support. Your Employee Assistance Program is available 24/7 to listen and connect you with resources.

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1. World Health Organization (WHO). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Post-COVID-19 condition. [who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-post-covid-19-condition](https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-post-covid-19-condition). December 16, 2021. Accessed April 4, 2022.
 2. WHO. Department of Mental Health and Substance Dependence: Gender Disparities in Mental Health. [who.int/mental_health/media/en/242.pdf](https://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/242.pdf). Accessed April 4, 2022.
 3. WHO. COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. [who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide](https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide). March 2, 2022. Accessed April 4, 2022.

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