

Hand Shakes to Heart Aches: A Tale of the Pandemic

Throughout our lives, communication is crucial. Even our youngest, infants, speak to us through their language of cries and screeches. The very foundation of our society is built upon it. So, when lockdown holed us up in our homes for months on end without human contact, well, we weren't pleased. Advised to wear masks and social distance, we were left scrambling for something to substitute for the facial expressions that once told us about how a person was feeling. And this was clearest in the classroom. As virtual learning became the norm, the traditional experience of going to school was tainted. The vibrant hand paintings that had decorated every classroom, were replaced by drab white walls, and silence replaced laughter. The things that used to make our days were lost in lockdown.

I recall how close my friends and I had been before 2020. We were positively inseparable, complete comrades. We had a secret handshake, a special combination of high-fives and fist-bumps that we did after each set of draining tests at school. Initially, we had been exhilarated at the news of the upcoming lockdown, childishly fantasizing about all the things we could get away with. Fifth-grade me imagined playing Minecraft and Fortnite with friends as a teacher droned on about the American Revolution. However, I never doubted the bond between my friends and me. In my mind, we were like a set of interlocked iron chains. But, as I learned after our first test, even those could snap under the right pressure. And lockdown provided just that.

It was a dark, rainy day in March, and I had just submitted an assessment for math. I leaped out of my seat, ready to feel the relief that always flooded me after each exam. But it was with great sorrow that I sat back down. No high-fives or fist-bumps awaited me in my secluded

room, only stillness. Draped across my chair, I reflected on my life and how the pandemic had torn it apart. Isolation from my friends, the people who made me strive to be my best self, demolished my will to participate in class. Soon after, I began reading online books, watching movies, and playing video games during my classes, and all of these combined tanked my grades. Like a bullet, they shot from straight A's to C's. But I made it to sixth grade, a new slate one may think. But no, the pattern from fifth grade repeated again. Though I saw what was happening, I felt like the part of my soul that made me care had been ripped out. So, I didn't care when I failed classes or lost competitions, or let my future slip down the drain. The only feelings left in me were anger and self-hatred.

This all came to a head one day near the end of the school year. I was sitting at my desk, feeling lower than a rock that had plummeted to the bottom of the Mariana Trench. I had just opened my grade book and was overcome by despair. I felt like I failed life in general and was having serious thoughts of just giving up studying as a whole. College? High School? Irrelevant. My head sank in shame and I felt light, as though I was floating in a dream. "Yash? Are you okay?" said a voice, jarring me from my trance. I looked up to see my mom's concerned face at the door. Her face softened as she looked at me and asked "What happened?" in a comforting tone. And suddenly, I spilled everything out. I told her about playing games during class and how my grades were plummeting. How I didn't know what to do and the impossibility of the situation. And how all my self-loathing was eating me up from inside. It felt so good to talk about my problems after months of maintaining silence.

My mom stood there in silence for a few moments, processing what I had just said. Finally, she said quietly, "Yash, if you don't understand something, you have to go to your teachers and ask them about it, and remember, I'm always there to help you." I look up at her,

disbelief clouding my eyes. These were the same people whose classes I had slept through. How was I even supposed to start the conversation, much less ask for help? But she insisted to try it out. The next day, after math class, I stayed on Google Meet. “Yes Yash, do you have a question?” asked Mrs. Rollo. I nodded my head, before realizing with a start that my camera was still off. I hurriedly turned it on and unmuted myself. “I’m... still unsure about how to solve proportion questions.” Mrs. Rollo looked dazed for a moment - after all, we had learned proportions two months ago. But with a determined look, she resolved to explain them during office hours. I repeated this with each of my teachers, and though I still have work to do, I had improved greatly by the end of the school year.

So now I wonder: How did the pandemic affect our mental health? And the simple answer is that it isolated us. By attacking the building blocks of human society, COVID harmed us in a way that nothing else could: it kept us away from our friends, attacking our very sense of belonging. But this virus forgot one critical aspect of our lives - an aspect that led to its downfall: humans stick together. As my mom and teachers helped me in my time of trouble, thousands of others found support to help them through those trying times. With that kind of solidarity, nothing could have stopped us – not even the vexing virus known as COVID-19.