

How Getting COVID-19 Forced Me to Re-Examine My Life



Slowing down helped Radha Ruparell figure out what really mattered to her.

BY RADHA RUPARELL | OCTOBER 12, 2020

On April 5, 2020, I started to feel tired in the middle of the day. A couple days later, I found myself trying to catch my breath on a conference call. It was then that I first suspected I might have this new virus that everyone was talking about, COVID-19. Six months later, I am still in the battle.



The first few weeks of this illness were a rollercoaster. In the early days, I felt like I had been drugged with sleeping pills and couldn't even muster energy to get out of bed. At nights, I faced explosive headaches and fevers that brought haunting hallucinations. I would fall asleep for a couple of hours, often to be jolted awake gasping for air. Unable to hold down food, I shed ten pounds in a month.

Soon my symptoms progressed to a point where I was truly scared for my life. I went to doctors looking for answers, but even they were uncertain. My heart sank when, after discovering a lesion in my brain, a neurologist told me: "I'm sorry. We can try some things and see if they work, but we just don't know enough yet."

Fortunately, I made it through those harrowing first weeks. Yet in the weeks that followed, I discovered that I had become a "long-hauler" facing a long-lasting post-viral syndrome. Months later, I still face waves of fatigue where my body shuts down if I don't get enough rest.

Prior to this virus, I was healthy in mind and body. I meditated, surfed, played tennis, and walked around Manhattan with a New Yorker's hurried gait. I lived a fast-paced life. And then COVID-19 hit me. Now, I have been forced to slow down.

Slowing down has been tough—and it has also been an incredible gift.

Noticing what's right there

In the early part of this illness, I was in isolation alone at home. With constant physical pain, fatigue, and brain fog, I was unable to work. I didn't have energy to do anything else, either. I could not read, watch TV, exercise, or do other normal activities.

Sitting in isolation with zero distraction was unnerving because then I had no choice other than to really *be with* everything that was unfolding. As I lay bedridden, I found myself reflecting on my life, pondering not what I had accomplished but who I had been along the way. Had I been kind to my family and friends? Had I taken full responsibility for my mistakes? Had I expressed myself fully and let the world see who I really am?

On day 14, I finally broke down and admitted to a friend that I had never been more scared in my life. For two weeks, I had been resisting my fear. My fear of dying. My fear of losing loved ones to this illness. But finally, when I was able to let go and just be with that fear, suddenly it wasn't as terrifying anymore. My friend couldn't take away my pain, but she created a safe space for me to share what I was feeling. Sometimes, all we need in difficult times is to be witnessed and heard.

I also discovered that when I started slowing down and allowing myself to embrace all my emotions, it wasn't just fear, angst, or sadness that arose. I started opening up my heart in new ways to love, connection, and all the beauty that surrounded me.

As one example, seven weeks into my fight, I celebrated my 40th birthday. On paper, that day might have sounded like a disaster. There was no big celebration. And yet, it was the most beautiful birthday ever. As I received warm notes from friends and family around the world, something amazing happened. Instead of the day whizzing by, as it usually does, I was able to really sit with all the love that was pouring in. I soaked it all in. It was a deeply moving experience.



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Slowing down also helped me rediscover things I had taken for granted. When I left my apartment after 27 days in isolation, the first thing I noticed were the beautiful tulips growing in a little patch outside of my building. I have lived in this apartment for five years. Why had I never really noticed these flowers before in springtime? Oh, and the feeling of a breath of fresh air, a gust of wind, and the first time seeing trees again after a month indoors. It was as if I were a kid experiencing these things for the first time.

What would life feel like if we always approached the world with childlike wonder? What if we soaked in the magic of each moment like it was our first and last one on earth? Instead of taking these simple pleasures for granted, what if we were truly present in our lives?

This might sound sappy, but learning to savor and appreciate good experiences in life is one of the most important keys to well-being. And it gives us more energy and strength to face the difficult experiences.

But busyness has become a normal way of life. In fact, we often wear it as a badge of honor. We are so busy running on autopilot, often in triggered states, that we can easily miss what's right in front of us. We miss the magic that exists simply in taking a walk outside or sharing a meal with loved ones.

Slowing down helped me pause and notice. I am now so much more aware of what's been right in front of me all along.

Unlearning bad habits

Slowing down didn't just help me savor the little things in life. It also forced me to recognize the importance of rest. In battling post-viral fatigue syndrome, I learned that if I didn't pause and rest regularly, I would quickly relapse.

So when I returned to work, I had to learn entirely new ways of operating. I had to say no to meetings and projects that I would have otherwise taken on. I had to rest in the middle of the day to avoid waves of pain and fatigue from escalating. I had to learn that while I was brimming with ambition around things I wanted to accomplish, not everything had to get done that day. And, mostly, I had to learn to let go of any guilt associated with operating slowly, because the guilt just made the mental and physical pain worse.

On my fridge, I put a Post-it note—"Be gentle with yourself"—as a daily reminder to practice self-compassion. Soon I discovered that when I was kind and respectful to myself, I was also much more grounded and generous in my interactions with others around me. For example, when a coworker showed up stressed to a meeting one day, I reminded myself that "just like me, they, too, are dealing with difficult things." Rather than getting triggered and adding to the stress, I tried to listen without judgment. In these times of collective trauma, we all deserve a bit of compassion.

There's a myth that self-compassion means letting yourself off the hook. But, as I experienced, practicing self-compassion actually makes you more motivated to improve and resilient to setbacks—without the procrastination, stress, and rumination we get from being self-critical.

Slowing down is hard for so many of us "achievers" because our default norms are set otherwise. Initially, I tried to power through the fatigue and pain. But for the first time in my life, that strategy did not work. What I discovered about slowing down is that it's not really about learning a new skill; rather, it's about unlearning.



Self-Compassion Break

A healthier way to deal with stressful situations

When our routines are turned upside down, it can be daunting, that's for sure. Yet disruptive moments like the pandemic are also a perfect time to break free of default ways of being. We can start questioning the things we do on autopilot and focus on what really matters.

For me, I realized that what really matters is connection—from family to close friends to communities where I feel belonging. I have a newfound desire to be more intentional and fully present in all these interactions. What a shame it would be to come to the end of our lives and discover that we missed appreciating the “little things” that feel so ordinary at times—like a daily embrace with a child or partner—to later realize that these actually were the “big things” after all.

Time for a collective pause

When we slow down collectively, we create space to connect with one another more deeply. As the pandemic unfolded across the world, I first experienced it at my workplace, Teach For All, a global network of organizations in 58 countries working to develop collective leadership so that all children have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

In the early days of the pandemic, we hosted Zoom video calls where colleagues from around the world would get together. At the beginning of these calls, we would take a few minutes to check in with one another personally in small groups.

In these moments, I learned that some colleagues had family members afflicted with COVID-19. Others were struggling with working from home while parenting young children. Many were facing the daunting challenge of reimagining education in their

countries in the wake of indefinite school closures. These precious spaces to pause and be with one another were a chance to bear witness to each other's raw realities.

In these moments, we also discovered our deep interconnectedness. While the exact nature of our challenges differed, what we had in common was that all of us faced some upheaval and uncertainty, and that meant that we could also learn from one another. For example, soon after the pandemic unfolded, hundreds of teachers in communities around the world with limited internet access came together on a WhatsApp group (now known as the Teaching Without Internet Alliance) to share ideas for how to support student learning during school closures.

Slowing down also created an opportunity to pause and ask the bigger questions. Many nights, as I was lying ill in bed, I would hear chants of "Black Lives Matter" as protestors marched down my street. As I listened, so many questions emerged: "Why is it that we have been quiet as a society for so long to the horrible treatment of our fellow human beings? In what ways have I been complicit through my silence and inaction? And what is possible now that more people are waking up?" While these questions have been alive in certain communities for a long time, without a collective slowdown, we might not have reached this tipping point where the conversation has finally permeated more broadly.

Other questions that occupy my mind are around education. As more parents now get involved in their kids' education, and as teachers reimagine remote learning, I wonder: "What is the purpose of education? What is most important for kids to learn? How do we nurture curiosity, compassion, and consciousness in kids? How can we use this moment to reimagine education to enable more equitable outcomes for all kids?" Similar reckonings may be happening in other fields around the world, from health care to food systems to our workplaces.

As this global pandemic touches everyone, we have a unique opportunity to pause, connect with ourselves and one another, and ask the questions that really matter. And in this wide open space, perhaps we might unlock our imagination and collective responsibility and find new ways to tackle our greatest societal challenges.

I have (un)learned so much personally by slowing down. Now, I wonder, what would be possible for humanity if we all slow down just a little? If we purposefully choose not to return to our hectic lives as if nothing happened? What beauty, connection, meaning, and joy might we find waiting for us right there in plain sight?

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