

# The cataclysmic COVID-19 pandemic: THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING!

**It was unthinkable, but it has happened. A virulent and invisible virus, 10 microns in size, with no vaccine or cure yet, shut down our nation, the third largest country in the world with 330 million people. Overnight, our thriving cities became ghost towns. Schools were closed. Millions of businesses, restaurants, and stores were abruptly shuttered. Sporting events were instantly canceled. Air travel came to a halt.**

The largest economy in the world started to tank. Millions of people lost their jobs and were forced to stay home. The vital structures of society were dismantled. Our vibrant culture came to a screeching halt. It's a nightmare scenario that even the most imaginative science fiction writers could not have envisioned. By any measure, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic unraveled everything, and became a human catastrophe and a social calamity reminiscent of the deadly 1918 influenza pandemic, or the devastating plagues that decimated Europe during the Middle Ages.

The human toll in death and suffering was the real disaster. Emergency

departments and hospitals filled up with victims of the scourge, sickly and unable to breathe as the virus hijacked their red blood cells and lungs, and destroyed their alveoli. Compounding the disaster was a lack of medical supplies. The country was clearly caught off-guard, completely unprepared for the scale of the pandemic and the massive onslaught of desperately ill people requiring intensive care and special equipment. In addition, health care staff became stretched beyond the limit, and entire hospitals were transformed overnight into highly specialized ICUs. Medical care for millions with non-COVID-19 conditions was put on hold so that vital resources could be diverted to the desperately ill victims of these infections. Many physicians, nurses, and respiratory therapists—laudable heroes—succumbed to the perverse virus exhaled by their patients.

## **Insidious social effects**

COVID-19 is not only a murderer, but also a thief. It stole our Spring; our religious holidays (Easter and Passover); classroom education in schools and colleges; the Prom; weddings; graduation ceremonies; proper funerals; concerts; football, basketball, hockey, and baseball games; Broadway shows; and even data from animal research. More



**Henry A. Nasrallah, MD**  
Editor-in-Chief

**One of the many lessons of this pandemic: Life as we know it should not be taken for granted, and can change drastically overnight**

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**CINCINNATI**

important, it robbed us of our peace of mind, our liberty, and our pursuit of small pleasures such as family gatherings or schmoozing with friends at a nice restaurant. COVID-19 is a cruel, dastardly scoundrel.

I write this editorial as I sit at home, which I have not left for several weeks, like hundreds of millions in our country and around the world. We were all glued to TV news or the internet to learn about the latest updates, including the grim news of those who got infected, hospitalized, or passed away. Fear of dying permeated all age groups, especially those who were older and infirmed.

Making it worse was the relentless uncertainty. When will it end? Gradually or suddenly? When is it going to be safe to go to work again, or to visit our loved ones and our friends? When can we see our patients face-to-face instead of remotely by phone or video conferencing? When can we have live meetings instead of virtual video conferences? When will stores open so we can shop? When can we take our children or grandchildren to a baseball game or a show? Will the virus return next winter for another cycle of mayhem and social paralysis? When will the economy start to rebound, and how long will that take? Will our retirement accounts recoup their losses? So many questions with no clear answers. A malignant uncertainty, indeed.

And there are our patients who live with anxiety and depression, whose anguish is intensifying as they sit alone in their apartments or homes, struggling to cope with this sudden, overwhelming stress. How will they react to this pandemic? Obviously, a life-threatening event such as a deadly pandemic with no cure is likely to produce an acute stress reaction and, ultimately, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And if COVID-19 returns

next year for another unwelcome visit, PTSD symptoms will get a booster shot and lead to severe anxiety, depression, or suicide. Psychiatrists and other mental health professionals, who were already stretched thin, must contend with another crisis that has destabilized millions of patients receiving psychiatric care, or new patients who seek help for themselves or their family members.

One intervention that is emerging on a large scale is online therapy. This includes reassurance and supportive therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, stress management, resilience training, mindfulness, and online group therapy. Those therapies can be effective for stress-induced anxiety and dysphoria when pharmacotherapy is not available, and can provide patients with tools and techniques that can be implemented by the patients themselves in the absence of a physician or nurse practitioner to prescribe a medication.

### Lessons learned

This pandemic has taught us many lessons: that life as we know it should not be taken for granted, and can change drastically overnight; that human life is fragile and can be destroyed rapidly and ruthlessly on an unimaginable scale by an invisible enemy; that scientific drug development research by the often maligned pharmaceutical industry is indispensable to our well-being; that policymakers must always prepare for the worst and must have a well-designed disaster plan; that modifying human behavior and full compliance with public health measures are vital and can be the most effective way to prevent the spread of catastrophic pandemics, viral or otherwise; that we must all learn how to be resilient to cope with solitude and restricted mobility or socialization;

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that the human ingenuity and innovation that created technologies to enable virtual connectivity among us, even when we are isolated, has been a lifesaver during health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic; that the clinicians and health care workers treating highly infectious and desperately ill patients are genuine heroes who deserve our respect and gratitude; and that magnificent altruism outstrips

and outshines the selfish hoarding and profiteering that may emerge during life-threatening pandemics.

And that we shall overcome this horrid pandemic, a ghastly tribulation that changed everything.



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