Testing Positive Again

Like many people, I got tested positive for COVID-19. It was surreal how many feelings popped up from my HIV experience.

December 30, 2021 By Andrew Spieldenner, PhD

Yes, it happened. After a complete vaccination cycle and a third shot of the COVID-19 vaccine, I got it (a mild case thanks to the aforementioned vaccine shots). I would not have known except my brother had home tests and a friend texted me to let me know he had tested positive. I thought I had one of those travel/work too much colds that are common in my life.

Due to remote work options, I have been living outside of the US for most of the last two years, splitting time between Guadalajara and Montreal. In both Mexico and Canada, mask mandates are mostly followed - at least where I lived. In Canada, vaccine requirements are checked at every restaurant, bar and in-door entertaiment. In Mexico, a lot of recreation occurs outside or in open-window settings. I have felt fairly safe in my little bubble.

Then I came back to the US to switch out my Canada winter clothes for the Mexico suitcase. I met up with some friends. On the Monday following that, one friend (who gets tested weekly at his university) said he tested positive. Panic started my thoughts and heartbeat racing. I called my brother and asked him for a home COVID test. He grabbed one and rushed it to me. After a now-familiar nose swab and ten minutes, I checked.

It was positive.

I looked at it several times, the blue and pink lines marking some new disease in my life, wondering if perhaps the pink was too light to REALLY be positive. But it was.

Texted some colleagues and some folks that I was supposed to meet that week - "I just found out I was exposed to COVID - crap!" I was nervous about the information. What did it mean if I had COVID-19? I felt like I had a cold - could I get away with not telling people? Should I?

My brother is a healthcare professional. We talked about symptoms. He indicated that 10 days from the first symptom was the target isolation. He had heard a cough, but I had fatigue and a cold for a few days longer. It looked like my COVID-19 was mitigated through my vaccine shots, and my experience would be mild.

I was supposed to leave for Mexico in a few days. Was it safe to travel? How many people would be exposed? Some of my friends in Mexico have not been vaccinated yet and there was a birthday

party that weekend.

These were the thoughts that raced through my head as I called the airline and found another ticket, and booked a local hotel so that my family would not be further exposed. I packed my luggage up and went to the hotel to spend the rest of my isolation.

I voice messaged a friend I had dinner with the night before. He asked me to stop apologizing, that it was not my fault. I had not even realized I was apologizing so much. I felt like crap - "infectious" in a way that was familiar and unhealthy for my mind and spirit.

One thing is sure: if this were a year ago, I would be writing a different story. The distance we have come from 2020 to 2021 is profound, even if people want to imagine a different narrative. The terror of 2020 still sits in my bones - those days of fearing everyone and everything, getting everything delivered (and feeling fortunate to have that capacity), my mother washing groceries outside.

Today, in December 2021, getting COVID-19 showed me a few important points:

We do not live in a society that allows for time off for sickness.

We expect to go to work with a cold, a flu, or any number of pains and aches. I am from a family of refugees who never believed in taking a day off and this belief has carried into my life. Why do I have such a difficult time with staying at home or working from home if I feel ill?

As an Executive Director, I will continue to encourage my team to take time off if they feel under the weather and make allowances for health concerns.

We need COVID-19 home tests.

If these were not available, I would not have spent time at testing facility waiting for my results - not with a trip ahead. I would have gotten on a flight and seen my friends, exposing dozens (if not hundreds) of people. The home tests should be available for free to everyone who needs it.

Isolation has costs.

There are costs associated with isolation. In my case it was the hotel and food delivery, the change in travel plans, and the shift in time spent with family and friends. After a year (or more) in lockdown, isolation brings on mental anguish too.

When we as a society expect people to isolate for public health reasons, who should pay for that isolation? New York has a 311 number to report positive home tests and request assistance with isolation. Why don't more jurisdictions do this?

Stigma and blame are dangerous.

As we learned in HIV, stigma and blame are dangerous and become barriers to effectively battle a pandemic. In the case of COVID-19, I still hear people ask "how did you get it?" and "do you know who you got it from?" and none of that matters. What matters is how we protect each other and

ourselves.

What is the point in trying to find the "culprit" in an infectious disease? Are we trying to determine blame? For what?

My HIV diagnosis taught me that I am innocent, as anyone with a disease is. People have tried to make me feel "dirty" for my HIV for decades. Screw them: I refuse to engage that logic.

Vaccines work.

I don't know who needs to hear this but they do. The vaccine and the third shot taught my body how to fight COVID-19. Thanks to the vaccines, I had a mild experience.

Now we just need to end the global vaccine disparities.

Well now you know, I tested positive for COVID-19. And it sucked. And it could have been far worse. Get your vaccines, encourage family and friends to do it. If you know someone with COVID-19, don't ask them about how they got it, just accept that they did and show some compassion.

See you in 2022!