

## Reflecting on COVID-19 in 55 words

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None of the above authors have any conflicts of interest to report, nor is this piece related to any research funding.

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. For the weeks leading up to this declaration, coronavirus-related tension had been mounting in our hospital and our Family Medicine Residency Program (FMRP), located in a suburb of New York City. Resident physicians are always busy but the urgency of everything had begun to increase.

As most FMRPs do, we place a priority on the wellness of our residents and provide opportunities for residents to reflect, share and support one another in a group setting. But things were moving fast. By the time our regularly scheduled session arrived, the decision to move all such meetings online had already been made by our health system. The question became, “How could we address the concerns and emotions of resident physicians at this increasingly difficult time when we would all be ‘logging on’ from different places?” One answer was to use a technique that would be quick (*fitting with urgency of late*), somewhat structured (*like some of our newly adopted policies and rules*) and would promote sharing with the group (*something tangible that residents could create and share*). We decided on a session of 55-Word Stories. For a review of the history of the 55-Word Story as well as the process for writing one, see Fogarty (2010).

Following a brief discussion that COVID-19 was likely a trying time for residents both personally and professionally, the idea of the 55-Word Story was presented along with examples of previously published 55-Word Stories. Residents took turns reading aloud and commenting on the stories; some were sad, others were funny, but all were surprisingly moving. Next, the “rules” were shared along with a discussion of the process and the timeline

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for the activity. The list of general directions (e.g., “Don’t worry about the 55-word limit at first, just write”, “Complete sentences aren’t required”, “Contractions count as one word”, etc.) remained on the screen so residents could refer to them as needed.

It was time to write... The online meeting went silent, save for the sounds of keyboards clicking and pens scratching on paper coming from people’s respective online locations. After several minutes, we reconvened to share and hoped some brave residents would be willing. Next came an outpouring of thoughts and feelings, of support, understanding and commiserating. Residents’ expressed their concerns about their patients, their colleagues, their spouses, their children, their parents and themselves. This exercise reinforced how powerful the shared experience can be, particularly when we first take the time to put our thoughts to paper (or, in the age of technology, to our screens) to organize privately. Several stories are presented below.

### **Of Pandemic and Pregnancy**

Surprise, happiness, dreams. At the beginning.

Now, mixed emotions. Lie, it is mostly fear.

Fear, for exposing what I should be protecting because I do love my job.

I am the doctor. Should I do more or less?

Nothing will happen, that I know.

But fear lingers, and as resentment, it is heavier than cement.

*-Cristina Marti-Amarista, MD; PGY2*

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## **The Calm Panic**

COVID-19

Over hyped or under hyped?

China, France... please not us.

My body says run, but conscience says help.

I want to self-quarantine, but my MD makes me first line.

Nebs, steroids, do they even help?

Family alone, some elderly, just want to be close.

Why is toilet paper out of stock?

Just don't know.

*-Shan Malik, MD; PGY-2*

## **Uncertainty**

Am I too relaxed? Should I be scared?

Everyone wearing masks and walking in fear?

How long will this take?

The panic and the scare

How do I find balance in this place?

I tell them not to panic

Wash your hands as you would normally

In the end, how much can we be prepared?

*-Abigail Hamilton, MD; PGY-2*

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### **Woke up, fell out of bed...**

Dragged a comb across my head.

Thinking...

I look in the mirror, kiss my wife goodbye, drive to the clinic.

My five-year-old granddaughter will not take her first unaccompanied plane flight, with the possibility of a two-week quarantine.

Alone.

Will I bring home a corona viral kiss of death for my immunocompromised rheumatoid arthritic wife?

*-Howard Stephen Reinheimer, MD; PGY-3*

### **COVID-19**

In 2020 we must be six feet apart

COVID-19 bringing fear into our heart.

I see you six feet away, can't help but to  
wipe the tears away.

Social isolation is must, being on the  
frontline is tough.

The reflections of hugging my patients  
gets me by, as I see the number of

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cases rise.

*-Rolando Gomez, MD PGY-3*

Our hope (of course) is for a quick resolution to the COVID-19 pandemic, with as few people as possible affected by adverse consequences. We also hope that these stories might resonate with others who may be struggling. Lastly, we hope that some will see the utility in this 55-Word Story workshop format for dealing with difficult experiences, exploring emotions and promoting empathy, support and connection among physicians facing these situations together.

## **References**

1. Fogarty CT. Fifty-five word stories: "Small jewels" for personal reflection and teaching. Fam Med. 2010; 42:400-402.