



# A nurse is a gift to older parents with COVID-19: One nurse's story

Read about how a son, who's also a nurse, cared for his mother after she was infected with COVID-19 and the universal lessons they learned.

By Omar H. Almahmoud, PhD(c), MSN, RN

From the moment the World Health Organization classified COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, I was scared that it would infiltrate my home. My suspicions were confirmed when the Palestinian Ministry of Health announced the first case of COVID-19 in Bethlehem on March 5, 2020. To be honest, I wasn't concerned about

myself, but rather about my 80-year-old mother who has diabetes and hypertension. COVID-19 was proving to be particularly dangerous among the older adult population, and most older people who were developing acute pneumonia as a result of COVID-19 had chronic illnesses.

On September 25, 2020, my mother developed a fever, sweating, dyspnea,

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paleness with cyanosed lips, exhaustion, and panic. She tested positive for COVID-19 via a polymerase chain reaction test. She refused to go to the hospital for treatment, so I spent 14 days and nights as both her son and her nurse. My nursing skills and experience provided me with the tools to fight against COVID-19. The fact that I'm a nurse was a gift to my mom and, fortunately, we won the fight.

I kept notes about every minute I spent with my mother during her illness. This article uses an exploratory single case study approach to offer an in-depth and inside view of an older woman's experience with COVID-19 within her social context. Five main themes emerged: denial, fear, coping strategies and preventive measures, confusion, and positive family relationships (see *Themes and subthemes*).

### Before COVID-19 infection

My mother denied the existence of COVID-19 on several occasions. Before she became infected, she claimed COVID-19 wasn't true and that it was a political ploy by the government to extract money from the public.

*"I had heard about corona from television and relatives before I became infected, but I*

*told them it was far away and that it was just a rumor. They want to profit from us."*

My mother stated at the outset of the news about COVID-19 that she didn't believe in and refused to use preventive measures, such as gloves and masks, to protect her from infection.

*"My sons brought me disinfectants and gloves, but I laughed and never used them, nor did I take any precautions. I went to my granddaughter's wedding party in Ramallah, where we danced, and they hugged and kissed me."*

She expressed various concerns about the effects of shutting down the state in a variety of ways, including loneliness, the loss of relatives' jobs, a lack of money, fear of poverty, and disability as a result of not being able to purchase food and other basic necessities.

*"I swear the lockdown isn't helping. People have lost their jobs, money, and food, and have nothing to do. My husband stays at home and doesn't attend the mosque, and neither do my grandchildren. Schools are closed and everything is closed. It's like the war of 1967, but it's even worse."*

Despite my mother's concerns, she expressed her gratitude to God numerous times and stated that everything is

### Themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Denial	Declare COVID-19 false and deceptive Refuse protective measures
Fear of the COVID-19 pandemic	Express fear of death, scandal from neighbors and stigmatization, and quarantine and social isolation
Coping with the pandemic and preventive measures	Practice preventive measures Change daily lifestyle habits Engage in spiritual habits Exhibit readiness to cope with restrictions Indicate awareness of being in a risk group
Confusion from social media and broadcasting news	Express distrust and suspicion about treatment and vaccination and confusion about the nature of the vaccine
Positive intrafamily relationships	Connect with daughters, sons, and grandchildren State awareness of worthiness of older parents' presence Convey hope for a healthy life

excellent from God and life will go on with or without COVID-19.

### **During COVID-19 infection**

Because we live in a village, my mother expressed a great deal of embarrassment about being labeled a “corona patient” by her neighbors, particularly when the health team arrived at her home to transport her to the hospital. After the health team arrived, my mother refused to go to the hospital because she had heard that everyone who went before her died, so she began shouting and wailing, pleading with them not to bury her alive.

*“They arrived to take me to the hospital, which was really frightening, unpleasant, and scandalous. Now all of our neighbors are frightened of becoming sick if they come into contact with my family.”*

Although she originally doubted its existence, when my mother became infected with COVID-19, she displayed extreme dread. She would cry for minutes at a time; fear, ranging from minor anxiety to almost hysteria, was evident during her lived experience.

*“Particularly during the night, I can’t sleep. It’s hard for me to believe the morning light arrives after such a dark night. The second night was the most difficult. I felt like something was bursting out of my chest and smothering me, and I was about to die.”*

My mother continued to exhibit strong spiritual connections during her sickness. She stated that she prayed to God every day for relief from her pain and protection for her husband and family from the virus.

*“I read the Qur’an and prayed in my bed all the time, and I begged God to help me. And I said, ‘All glory to God.’”*

Respiratory symptoms, such as dyspnea, shortness of breath, and activity intolerance related to hypoxia and low oxygen saturation, were the most difficult and recurring symptoms that my mother experienced. It was essential to have a portable oxygen generator with a capacity

of 2 to 4 L/min that could be operated using a simple face mask or nasal cannula. Regular bronchodilators, such as budesonide, albuterol, and ipratropium bromide, as well as I.V. dexamethasone, were successful in both treating and weaning her off oxygen therapy.

### **After COVID-19 infection**

After my mother recovered, her life habits were altered, such as not going out to visit neighbors, sons, and daughters. She began wearing a mask and gloves and routinely using alcohol-based hand sanitizer. She stated she was following all my directions to the letter and that they became second nature to her.

*“After I was healed, I put on a face mask and refused to shake hands with visitors or kiss my family, and I requested my grandson to clean things up and spread disinfectant all over. It isn’t acceptable to inform my neighbors that they aren’t welcome to visit me, but I clean with disinfectant as soon as they leave. I take a shower shortly after becoming acquaintances with strangers. When I take a shower or go upstairs, I get fatigued, but I take a break and keep going. I take my daily vitamin tablets without assistance and I asked my son to remove the oxygen generator from my room.”*

My mother expressed her acceptance and willingness to put up with this new constrained lifestyle.

*“After the infection, I sanitize my hands and all surfaces every hour and stay at home watching TV. I don’t leave the house without the mask and only go out for medical appointments. Nothing is worth the pain I’m going through. I won’t travel anywhere, not even to see my relatives. All that happened to me is from the crowds of people at my granddaughter’s wedding.”*

She also realized that older people are more susceptible to COVID-19 infection.

*“All of my children were infected with the coronavirus but because they’re young, the symptoms were mild and they were cured within days. The elderly aren’t the same. In*

corona, two of my friends died. Both are elderly and it's better for them to die than to suffer. May God have mercy on them."

However, my mother lost trust in information from newscasts and social media because of contradictory news from numerous sources. She understood that COVID-19 infection provided her with some immunity, and she believed that it was better to take precautions rather than risk getting an unknown immunization.

*"Every day on television, they tell us that they've discovered a treatment and vaccination, but they also say that someone is dying as a result of the treatment or vaccine. What should I do? The vaccine scares us more than the virus itself. I don't want to be immunized. In Israel, two people died as a result of this immunization. I want to rely on my natural immunity, and I'm confident that God will look after the old."*

With the new surge in the delta variant, and the invention of a single-dose vaccine, I did finally persuade my mother to be vaccinated against COVID-19. She experienced slight pain at the injection site, but no serious adverse reactions.

### **Family connections**

From a personal standpoint, my mother underlined the beneficial aspects of her experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. She claims that her sons and daughters are much more concerned about her now than they were before her illness. In addition, my presence in her life provides her with a tremendous amount of positive inspiration.

*"Corona binds me to my daughters and boys more than any other time. My daughters look after me hour by hour after I've recovered, and my children never leave me alone."*

My mother previously stated that she was lonely, and her sons and daughters didn't show much concern for their parents because they were preoccupied with work and family obligations. However, she feels that they now recognize how important it is to have parents in one's life.

*"When I was diagnosed with the disease, I saw my daughters and sons crying, and when I recovered, I saw them crying with happiness as well. For me, a new life has begun. All of my sons and daughters continue to love me. You're a gift from God to me, and I love you."*

### **Implications for nursing practice**

During my mother's illness, it was the first time I realized that nurses are a gift to their families, particularly their older parents. Nursing is a challenging and demanding career; during this unique and personalized experience, I saw that a person's presence at the bedside is more therapeutic than any other means of communication. Neither the telephone nor social media is as effective. Nonverbal expressions, such as facial expressions, eye language, and tears, are more difficult or even impossible to detect from a distance. My mother used a lot of nonverbal communication while she was sick. She had a happy facial expression when she talked about her healing phase and starting a new life with her beloved family members. However, she cried and her voice tone changed when she spoke about her experiences during her illness.

The main weakness I encountered during this experience was that I was unable to express sympathy as much as I would've liked because I wanted to avoid showing any signs of fear in front of my mother, so I kept my emotions and pain buried. However, by touching her hands and wiping her tears, I was able to establish trust with her, and she now sees me as her angel and her endless hope for a lovely and safe life. Her spiritual life and belief in God and the goodness of faith, as well as my presence, provided her with a positive power in the struggle against the virus. As she has said over and over, "I am the winner."

### **Holistic care**

Most nurses will be involved in the care of a loved one at some point in their lives. The nurse's role in patient care is

crucial, and it's incredibly significant when caring for a close relative. Nothing can replace being physically present beside your loved one when they're in need, especially when, as a nurse, you know just what to do to provide physical, social, emotional, and spiritual care. ■

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