

Bilkis' story 18th June 2020

About me	Household	Spouse	Children	Community and area
Female. Indian-British. Social worker	Large and unconventional household: it's two houses next to each other, living as one residence, with me, my three adult sons and young daughter living in one house, and my partner living next door with our two foster sons and a supported lodger	Pakistani-British partner who works as a self-employed accountant	Two adult sons who are key workers, one's a social worker, and one works as a healthcare assistant in the NHS	A mixed community, about 50/50 BAME. A semi-rural area that's very central to the city centre. I love our community; it feels pretty safe and the neighbours look out for each other

My life before COVID

We enjoyed an active lifestyle before lockdown. My partner and I balanced part-time jobs with being parents to several boisterous children. They love the outdoors so we are often down the park, swimming or playing football. My sons had planned to move into a separate house after Ramadan¹. When things got serious around COVID, we had a family meeting to discuss their plan and two of my three sons decided to move out which was a big change for us as a family.

There has been different attitudes towards lockdown and a lot of tension on the extended family WhatsApp group around the relaxing of guidelines. People were sharing articles questioning 'family rights'. I think because some family members aren't following the guidelines it makes those who are following them look worse. I felt like I was being like the awkward one, but I was just trying to be safe and keep my children safe. My sisters are very much supportive, but my brothers have not been; we've even been called the COVID police!

Dad turned up at my house and I had to make him sit in the garden and stop my daughter from giving him a hug. I think he was a little bit offended. At one point, one of the older people in the family wanted to arrange a socially distanced picnic but the children wouldn't understand why they have to stay 2-metres away from each other. I used the excuse of fostering to say I can't do anything like that. My grandma needed a ventilator for oxygen and my mum thought she just had the flu! When my brother visited, even though he followed all the necessary precautions, he came back feeling all shaky, and they said 'oh you've just caught a bit of flu, you're being really dramatic'. Then he tested positive and that was a bit of a wakeup call to my parents. Sadly it took that for them to realise the seriousness of it.

My experience of COVID

I was the first one to get ill from our household during Ramadan¹. I was so exhausted. I had a mug of tea and it was a big effort to even get it up from the table – and I'm not one to just sit and feel very lethargic ever. After that first 24 hours, I felt tightening in my chest and a high temperature, but I didn't have the cough right until

¹ Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. During this period, people with a Muslim faith abstain from food and drink (fasting).

the end. I rang 111 and they said it sounded like a viral infection and advised me to see how it goes in the morning and to ring my GP. My doctor said they can't prescribe anything for a viral infection, just paracetamol, lots of fluids and rest. My social worker colleagues suggested I get tested, so I found the nearest drive through testing centre. It was very surreal. At 11PM the next day I got the notification to say I'd tested positive. I was shocked because I felt I was getting a bit better. I had to contact the out of hours social worker for the children and got the whole family tested just in case. Everyone tested positive.

Then my husband started to get really ill and his temperature was high. He was like a zombie and couldn't get out of bed. That really worried me as he's older than me and has diabetes. We contacted 111 again and a nurse advised us how to control his fever with a cold flannel. We took lots of orange juice, paracetamols and rested. It was a good job that my other sons weren't living here because whilst we had COVID in the main household, they were our support network.

The children didn't seem to be affected by symptoms at all. Still for those eight days after testing positive we didn't go anywhere. Our supported lodger usually works in a takeaway but he stayed home. The social worker said the kids could go back to school after two weeks, but we were quite cautious so waited for a negative test. It's been challenging at times, as some of the decisions for parenting are taken out of our hands. Like, if we wanted to keep our foster children out of school as a precaution, we couldn't legally do so.

My life after COVID

"Living under lockdown has made me realise that I prefer a simpler life... it's been quite a positive experience in that way to have bonding time together as a family... over the years you have to take responsibilities on, not realising how much that you do... so before rushing back to normal, just consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to."

Little has changed for us - we're still living in lockdown and being careful. The kids are on a limited curriculum at school and travel there in a taxi. My husband and I can work online from home. We're doing the same walks and bike rides, but not seeing any other family. What's affected me most personally is missing out on my niece's first two and a half months of life. They only live round the corner and I haven't met her yet. We were supposed to go to in a villa in Spain this June. That got cancelled which was disappointing for the family, as it takes a lot of hard work for us to synchronise a week. Even as guidance changes, I'll still be quite worried about going to my brother-in-law's who's had a kidney transplant.

Why my COVID experience matters

Guidance from the government has been confusing, particularly with the easing of lockdown. At the beginning it was more clear - no non-essential trips outside the house. I felt that maybe the lockdown came too late and questioned why the policy response was so slow when other countries have locked-down! I'm expecting another rise in cases or another lockdown.

I don't think information is being filtered down to people in the appropriate language in BAME communities, or that the seriousness of the situation has been communicated as efficiently and clearly as possible. For instance,

my auntie-in law in Rochdale watches the news in Urdu and has limited English. Written information just wouldn't be accessible to her - she relies on what we tell her. What about people who don't have family to pass on the correct information about self-isolation?