

Cassim's story 19th June 2020

About me	Household	Extended family	Community and area
I'm a 41-year-old male and I've been living here for 15 years now. I'm a Public Rights of Way Officer	Our household has four people; me, my wife and two sons, aged 12 and 17, who are both at school. My wife's a healthcare worker. We are all fit and healthy.	I have a very big family - eight brothers and sisters who all live relatively local. The closest is across the road from me, like a typical Pakistani family, and the rest of them are all within this inner-city suburb. There is a lot of toing and froing between my families' houses, that's a given. All of my wider family are fit and healthy, but my parents are 70-something now and so they have the onset of age-related diabetes.	It is a heavily built-up area, we have most things on our doorstep. It's not an affluent community nor is it deprived. It's quite nice because it's very mixed in terms of people; white, Asian lots of Indian people, there's a few Romanians moving in now. I've never really experienced discrimination.

My life before COVID

We're very outdoorsy people. I'm an outdoor instructor, so the majority of our weekends are spent leading people up the mountains, mountain biking or climbing. We were either in local parks or eating out, nothing fancy.

I first heard about COVID in the early days, when it was in Wuhan. I didn't keep updated on the nith details, just the typical information that goes around. I was initially in denial, thought it was just like the flu, why are people stressing? When the daily count started happening, there was excitement and trepidation. I have an interest in environmental mapping and they started releasing really cool maps of the spread! I did watch the daily briefings, but after a while I just thought it was a load of rubbish.

My experience of COVID

"I realised this is serious and we're not locking down and we're not really taking the measures that we need to take. I very quickly realised this is a global disaster and it definitely hit home, like 'oh shit, this is serious'."

I probably got it either from work or via a friend. There was one girl in my team who didn't come in because she had symptoms and I had had a meeting with her the day before. They sent us all home on a Wednesday and by Thursday I started showing symptoms. One of my mates who I'd been in contact with also had symptoms. The boys got it about a week later and had almost exactly the same mild symptoms.

We had a few days of fever, then the cough come in and then the taste and the smell go away. That was way back when that wasn't an established symptom, but that was very prominent for us, to the point where we

were just eating porridge. The fever wasn't massively strong, so we just did the standard things, rest and drink. The cough was the most annoying thing imaginable and cough mixture is just rubbish, so I had one of my mates drop off some Lemsip. We couldn't do anything about the loss of taste, that lasted about two weeks. My sister was very ill with a fever and bed-ridden for over a week. We never got any formal diagnosis, so it's unlikely but still possible that we didn't actually get it.

We did a full lockdown and self-isolated in the house; we got some food delivered once but otherwise we didn't do any shopping, we didn't go and see anybody, my parents have their conditions and my brother just had a baby, so we kept everyone away. We used to do Zoom meetings with everyone. My dad wasn't worried, he said "Allah will protect us".

My life after COVID

My wife was in Pakistan for her brother's wedding. She went in February and came back in April. I was supposed to go with her but cancelled because of COVID. People in Pakistan told her not to go home to a country where there's a pandemic, because in Pakistan nobody had it. I was worried about spending that much time locked in the house together, but imagine if she was stranded in another country, that's one more stress that I don't need.

I started shopping at Aldi really early because I hate crowds. As time's gone on, I'm a lot more relaxed about it. It's largely due to the fact that we've already had symptoms so I can't give it to anybody else and nobody else can give it to me, I'm free!

Recently we have been going to people's houses. My mate who had similar symptoms lives alone, so we thought if he's not going anywhere and I'm not going anywhere, and we've had the symptoms, then we can go and sit in each other's houses.

We've also been going to our parent's house quite often, not all together though. Someone will go in the day, someone will go at night, so we've all seen each other but at different times. The first time I saw my parents was the day my wife came back from Pakistan. My plan was for her to spend two weeks in quarantine, but she bought some stuff from Pakistan for my parents and when we visited them at their home everyone was like 'who let her in there?'.

I'm quite resilient in respect of the lockdown, but my wife has been going to her friend's houses. My eldest son has had weeks where he's not been out of the house, not even for a health walk. Not because he's COVID-aware but he can't be arsed to move. My youngest has been quite chirpy going out on bike rides and walks here and there.

We've not done any big social family walks. We did go to my parent's house for Eid¹. We all intended to go separately, but we ended up being there at the same time and we just had to be sensible. I really enjoyed

¹ Eid is an important event, which are celebrated by people with a Muslim faith. Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the fasting month. Eid al-Adha (acknowledging prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son

Ramadan² this year because everyone read more. I normally struggle to finish one Qur'an, but I finished two this year.

Why my COVID experience matters

I'm looking forward to hopefully a culture change. There has been a hell of a lot of community spirit and I'd hardly ever spoken to my neighbours before. Everyone has come to this realisation that this is all of our problems. Getting out and clapping together, that's brought communities back together again in a very localised sense. People are coming together to help each other out, like the mosque³ has taken on the responsibility of ensuring that the Muslims can have a proper burial. I know people who have died and not had a proper burial. That's really affected the community.

On a regular basis I think about why BAME people don't visit the outdoors. Do they think it's for white people? If people can't enjoy their local environment, they won't go any further. We need local facilities and green spaces. If you look at the two parts of [regional park], the part with the swings and the slides is owned by [Local Authority] and they've put in huge amounts of investment to make it really lovely. But if you go to the other side [different Local Authority] it's just nothingness, there's tyres and sofas and mattresses, and you get a bit of night-time dodgy activity going on there, because rubbish attracts rubbish.

COVID's been very good for the nation to look at how we can do things differently - the Government need to learn from the positives. Nobody should be allowed to commute, if you can work from home, because that would solve half our environmental problems - we've seen the skies clear up. It's better for my health and wellbeing because I don't have the stress of going to the office, no more shirts and ties! They need to focus on future wellbeing because that's where you'll see long-lasting change. We are brandishing the NHS workers as heroes, but heroes are expendable, if you do value them, give them the resources that they need!

² Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. During this period, people with a Muslim faith abstain from food and drink (fasting).

³ Mosque is a place where people with a Muslim faith gather together to worship. It is also where funerals take place.