

Dawood's story 22nd June 2020

About me	Household	Family	Community and area
26-year-old male. I'm not at work, I've just been studying and doing stuff privately at home.	In this house we have myself, my two brothers, their wives and my three nieces. The third generation at home are my very elderly parents.	My older brother has got a recruitment company. He's 48 and my other brother is 31. My nieces are 17, 14 and 6, so they were all in school. My dad had diabetes and a heart bypass 10 years ago, he passed away from COVID. He was in his 80's. My mum is late 60's and has high blood pressure and cholesterol.	My parents have lived in [City] since the 70's and I've lived here my whole life. We live right off the main road; there's lots of shops around and there's the park nearby. It's very densely packed with Asian families, a lot of young children hanging out, not always causing trouble! We have a few homeless people and openly there's drug usage. There's also a lot of crime, fights, and violence that goes on, but despite that I've never actually felt unsafe, they're your people and no harm will befall you.

My life before COVID

It is a very busy household - everyone is working or studying and so before the pandemic we were just going to work and doing normal activities. My dad was very active for his age. He was always doing the shopping and getting out the house; that was his way of being independent. We have a lot of immediate family; we've got five brothers and two sisters, and my parents have many grandchildren. As an Asian family, we tend to have a main house where everyone comes for family events. We're very collective in family decision making.

In the early days people did whatever they wanted to, even in the local grocers there wasn't much appreciation that we should be staying at home. I decided to stay at home because I've got asthma. There was a period where it started slowly going back to normal, when people started going to shops and it was very crowded. When my dad passed away, that stuff became more noticeable because you have a personal connection to why you should stay in. They don't understand the effects of what they're doing, and the wider effects on their family.

One of my brothers had a lot of fear and I could see him developing OCD-like traits around touching, cleaning, not going out. Because of social media, WhatsApp, people forwarding things, BBC news, it spiralled with members of households disagreeing how to do things. When you have such a big household, it's very hard for everyone to be on the same page. It's too much information for me, I would shut off.

My experience of COVID

"People don't understand, you've got a fear of your life here. Literally every other day someone passing away, someone that I knew, or someone close to me, someone in the community. I remember thinking when will this stop? I couldn't bear that anymore. I couldn't deal with death anymore. It was just a constant, and losing someone that's personal to you, all those deaths meant so much more. I felt them."

I was on holiday in Fez in February and on the flight back we saw signs addressed to people from China. The Government knew two months in advance what was happening, but they were putting out regulations and rules like guesswork. So there was a lot of anger and frustration. China, Turkey and Morocco all had a quarantine, lockdown, curfew and no questions asked. Here, the lockdown only happened when the deaths were increasing so much, they were almost forced to do it.

In March, my nieces had mild symptoms but at the time we didn't know what all these symptoms were. She felt weak, very high fever, body pains, coughing, then it kind of faded away, and it was just like a normal cold. No one really thought about it.

In mid-March I got my own symptoms - I started getting a really high fever, sweating, coughing, shivers, muscle pain, body, all of that. I tried to stay in my room as much as I could and because I've got asthma, I was really monitoring my breathing. In this house, it was very difficult to maintain self-isolation.

It was one of the first times ever where I actually thought of death. It's surreal facing your own mortality and feeling trapped in your house. But by day thirteen I didn't feel that bad.

By then my dad was starting to feel unwell as well. We hadn't concluded it was COVID because he had a lot of other health issues. He had a fever and he was getting pains and difficulty seeing things. That was when we realised, this is in our house. We didn't know how to deal with the situation. There was a fear of mum catching it, but being in an Asian family, you can't stop an elderly couple from caring for each other. She kind of forgot about her own symptoms because she was so engrossed trying to help dad. My sister-in-law was bedridden, really high temperature, bodily pains, she lost her appetite and went into full isolation. My dad didn't allow anyone to come to the house, which was a massive thing for him. A big benefit of having a big Asian family, is you have that support network of family and friends for shopping.

We were monitoring my dad's breathing and one of my friends, a doctor, was advising me. We called the ambulance three times in that week. Once they came to see my dad and said he was stable and left. Another time they didn't actually come out. On the 27th March he got really bad around 11pm at night. The ambulance came and put an oxygen mask on him. They were very calm, there was no urgency. They even asked us 'what do you want us to do?', we just said 'we really need your help'. My brother was reluctant to let my dad go to hospital. We'd heard the news about how overwhelmed the NHS is, and rumours about bad practice, so there was fear.

The ambulance staff told us no one can go with him, no one can visit, which we didn't tell dad because he wouldn't have gone. As an Asian family, you don't let your parents go to the hospital on their own, especially when English isn't their first language, but we had no choice.

The next morning, the doctors called and said his chances were 50:50. What has happened in that period of time that he'd declined so rapidly? It was very hard to process.

In the afternoon they said he most likely had COVID. Then we realised the severity of the situation and my brother said we need to think about a funeral. It was very surreal. Just before sunset we got a call that he's

passed away, within 18 hours of going to the hospital. It was only after he passed away that we were told it was COVID. We weren't there with him, we didn't see how he was treated, we didn't see how he was transferred, we didn't see what he was exposed to.

My life after COVID

The local Muslim funeral service carried out the funeral with strict COVID procedures. We were only allowed six people and we couldn't see the body. As a Muslim community, as Asians, a funeral is a communal gathering, it's a communal goodbye, communal, paying your respects and my father was an elderly community figurehead, so if there was a funeral there would have been thousands of people. People in the family couldn't go and that hurt feelings.

Me and my four brothers went. We had to wear the PPE, the gloves, masks. We prayed at the graveyard; it was very clinical, no emotion in it. It felt very lonely and that didn't help the grieving process.

And then obviously no one could come to the house. This was probably the biggest difficulty because we couldn't grieve together. My sister was breaking down every day because she couldn't come and see mum. After three weeks we let her come and that helped her. Some other family members visited from a distance but that caused more pain than relief not being able to hug mum. They were just standing and crying. It's hard to describe being so alone, grieving, losing someone and not being able to have people around you to support you, but there was a sense of community. People put extra effort with messages trying to show that they care. Losing someone is massive anyway, but then to have the pandemic on top of that, it compounded the experience.

Why my COVID experience matters

There was nothing really to help our communities. What's needed is improved access for people whose first language is not English, as not everyone follows the news, and more sensitivity about how Asian communities work. There should be people who are paid to go and help and support these households and educate them, even having local doctors to call in. It would help people respect the guidelines. Volunteer groups tire out, and they need resources. We've lost trust in the government and I can see everyone's doing their own thing now.

They need to understand we're not all middle class, well educated, professionals who can afford to do certain things. I think that's why they almost rebelled, because they don't understand what it means to be in a household like ours. It's not easy for us to self-isolate from the family.

We didn't know how to deal with it all and that's coming from someone who's been brought up here, who knows the system. So for someone living on their own, who will be there to help them? I'm grateful that I have friends in those fields who helped me, without that I would have been very lost. We've learnt that we can be there for each other in the difficult times and how much we mean to each other.