

Grace's story 2nd July 2020

About me	Family and household	Community	Area
I am female and I work full time as a healthcare key worker	There's four of us. My partner works on the railway. My son is eight and my daughter's only two.	The demographic here is quite mixed. Everyone more or less has a low socioeconomic status, but you do not see White boys or White girls getting stopped and searched, you only see it happen with young Black boys in this area. I haven't personally experienced any prejudice in my immediate area. The only people I talk to here are my neighbours who are downstairs - she's a young lady with a small child who I keep an eye out for.	We've been at our current house for three years. I live in a block of flats that are quite close in proximity. There are no community amenities except a park and a place where children can play, but those places are not looked after by the council.

My life before COVID

The first time I read about COVID was in a newspaper article in November. I didn't get the impression that our government was taking it seriously and that had an impact on how everybody else reacted to it. Because my job is health based, our team were always kept abreast of developments with COVID. My manager was very proactive in doing that. The news became a bit traumatising after a while. I also kept up to date through informal networks: friends, family and other colleagues. We'd keep each other updated informally on what was going on via social media networks, things like Zoom, Teams, etc. I was very concerned because of the misinformation that was flying around.

There were differences I experienced, both personally, community wise and in my work. I was very aware of how much more Black women, like myself, would feel the impact. I felt very frustrated, because I knew I had to take the measures necessary to protect myself but the people around me and my peers at work, they didn't seem particularly bothered about it. I got the feeling that they felt the guidance and the consequences wasn't something that applied to them. I took it very seriously because of my two friends. I buried my friend who was 40 with no underlying health conditions. When you see it impact, you're forced to deal with it.

My experience of COVID

I was exposed to people that had COVID because my job involves visiting GPs and setting up their systems. The minute I'd been exposed to that I decided that I wasn't going back into the office, and my son wasn't going back to school. It also meant that I couldn't visit my grandmother who I do as much as I can for. We went from taking normal life for granted to me having to stay in the bedroom, my partner having to look after the children and an obsessive hand washing and clothes changing regime every time he came back in from outside.

My personal symptoms were very similar to a chest infection or a flu, except this flu was like a flu I've never experienced in my life. My whole body ached, my throat was dry, I had the cough, I had the temperature. I physically couldn't move for three or four days around my home. My breathing became quite laboured because I was coughing so much and my ribs hurt. I've actually still got remnants of this cough. Not being able to eat and sleep was another one.

I couldn't get through to my GP, they were obviously overwhelmed. I went through the e-service and the advice was basically the national guidance; 'stay at home' and obviously if things get worse then call an

ambulance. I didn't learn anything I didn't know already, it was rubbish! I was mindful of the pressure that the service was already under pre COVID, so you can only imagine how bad it was in the hospitals. I was never tested for it, I just had the symptoms.

My life after COVID

I had to work from home and educate my son from home. My partner had a rough time educationally growing up, so he hasn't got the confidence to help with that. With myself working fulltime it became very difficult and the housework doubled and tripled. I became very overwhelmed and my son became overwhelmed. He developed alopecia with all the stress in the house. His hair started to fall out and he was having meltdowns. I wasn't prepared for that. I'm not great at teaching children but I'm brilliant at teaching adults, so we concentrated on his mental health and emotional wellbeing and did educational activities. For my daughter, the environment was lovely because we were all there all the time.

There was a lot more anxiety around leaving the house and doing normal things like shopping. The support I have received has been mainly from family and friends, not from the community or local authority. There wasn't any support in my area socially or financially. I didn't receive any communications about services available to help alleviate additional stress. Every Thursday there was a young lady who would come out with the karaoke box and sing songs. She was just beautiful! She dressed up as a fairy and she stood outside on the grass and everyone can see. I don't know who she was, but I appreciated her doing that. In a way, that did feel supportive, it lifted up your spirits.

I'm really thankful because my family's been more or less untouched by COVID. I think everybody that's gone through COVID has been exposed to a trauma of some kind. I see that in my house in a way - that we're kind of coping or struggling to cope with the new way of things now.

Why my COVID experience matters

"I'm a Black woman, I'm aware of the intersectionality of my experiences, I'm aware that things like this will have a bigger impact on us than it might other ethnicities and genders."

For me, what happened with COVID is symptomatic of how deeply embedded racism and sexism is in our society. We've seen in the Police, the NHS and in education, that institutional racism is a persistent issue. Until those things are addressed, Black and Brown people are always going to face disparities, whether it comes to COVID, employment, education, etc.

The official guidance that was given out was very confusing and it ignored swathes of people that would have been disproportionately impacted by COVID. I personally felt that the official guidance was not being created with the evidence that was available. It felt very economy based, not people based. We know that the government wanted to try and disassociate COVID, Windrush and institutional racism from each other, but they're part and parcel of the same problem. I am certain that structural racism, sexism and violence are behind many of the inequalities we've seen as a result of COVID. Not to say that COVID caused them, but COVID highlighted them in a way that could not be denied. It's infuriating because this is not new knowledge.