

Grieving When Someone Dies of COVID-19

MORE THAN JUST A NUMBER



Over a million people in the U.S. have died of COVID-19. Despite attempts by journalists and public health officials to put these numbers into context, what gets lost in tracking case counts are the stories of the people who died, and their family members left behind. This is one of those stories. The story of Maria, beloved mother of four, who lived with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease for over a decade and died of COVID-19 in August of 2020. It's a story told by Mariana, Maria's youngest daughter. We spoke with Mariana in January of 2021. What follows are excerpts from our conversation.

On what it was like growing up with her mother...

She was a warrior. She was independent, strong, and she always said what was on her mind. And she was a woman of strong faith, humble, and she disciplined us when we needed it, but also gave us so much love. She had two jobs throughout my childhood. I didn't get to see her as often as I would have liked because she was always working.



This is an excerpt of Dougy Center's Grief Out Loud Podcast, Episode 180. To listen to the full interview with Mariana and to access our collection of resources for children, teens, and their family members grieving a death due to COVID-19, please visit dougy.org/covid.

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But the times that we would spend together, I really cherish them. And then when I was 14, our lives changed. My mom was diagnosed with ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. Being the youngest, and depending so much on my mom, it felt like the ground beneath me just fell, my mentality changed, I had to grow up and become the parent and take care of her. I couldn't imagine being on this earth without her.

On finding out her mom was diagnosed with COVID...

I was two days into the start of my grad program when I got a text from my brother saying that he and my other brother and my mom had tested positive for COVID. I knew what that could mean for my mom. I immediately wanted to grab my things and make the five-and-a-half-hour drive to be by her side, but my brother told me it would be best for me to stay safe in Austin. I felt hopeless and frustrated. I stayed and all I could do was wait, hope, and pray.

On realizing that her mom wasn't going to recover...

I still somehow had this hope that she would make it through, but then when they started bringing up the

conversation of ventilator or no ventilator, that's when I knew that this could be it. When the doctor said that there was nothing else they could do, I took the first flight home because I knew that even if I didn't get to see her or be there with her, I wanted to at least be in the same city.

On seeing her mom at the hospital...

My older brother begged them to let one person in to go see her. We were desperate and terrified knowing she was alone. When the hospital made the decision to let one person in, but only that night, my siblings chose me. At the hospital, they covered me in PPE. They told me to make it quick in order to reduce my exposure. I spent about 30 minutes with her. She was asleep because they had given her morphine. I held her hand and I stroked her hair. I said some prayers for her, I felt her heartbeat and the warmth of her hand and sort of like engraved those in my memory. I basically just told her that it was okay. That we would be okay. I got my siblings on FaceTime and we sang her Happy Birthday because her birthday was going to be two days later. Having to do that...singing her Happy Birthday through FaceTime...I couldn't believe we were in that situation. I made her some personal promises. I blessed her. And through my mask and face shields, I gave her a kiss, but it wasn't really a kiss because I had my face shield on. I wish I could have given her a real kiss or truly hold her hand, but I had to be covered in PPE. That was a whole other feeling of helplessness. The next day was when she passed away. The day before her 64th birthday, and four days before my 26th. I find comfort in the fact that she waited for me. She loved me so much that she fought COVID until I could be by her side and send her off with prayers and blessings. I think that's love in its purest form.

On grieving for her mom after her death...

I think I just sort of went into survival mode. I knew that I had to be strong because my mom and I had had these conversations throughout the years given her ALS diagnosis. I would tell her how scared I was for the day that she would no longer be with me. She always had this attitude of, "You have to be strong. You have to find that reason to keep living." That is still what

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gives me comfort nowadays, I feel like I'm still in the middle of it and I'm still processing, and I've told myself that healing is a long journey. It's not going to happen in a year. I'm not going to be over it, I'm going to learn to move forward with it. I just take life day by day. I know that whatever I do with my life, it always has to be in her honor and moving forward with that promise I made her: I'll always keep going, no matter what

On how COVID impacted the funeral...

I think that losing a parent is painful enough but losing them during a pandemic just adds another layer of grief. There was a two and a half week wait time at the funeral home due to the number of deaths. In Catholicism, it's traditional to have a funeral mass with the casket present directly before the burial. We couldn't have that because of the pandemic and that broke my heart because she was a woman of strong faith, and she was raised Catholic, and I knew how important that was to her. She'd already been unable to receive the last rites at the hospital, so this was another blow to our religion. At the funeral home, we were allowed only 10 people at a time. We decided to have an open casket service and the funeral home set up Plexiglas between my mom and the pew that is placed in front of the casket. Only my older brother touched her hands, but he was wearing gloves. Everyone at the service was wearing a mask. My siblings and I wore face shields, but we couldn't hug anyone, not even each other. And that was just painful. Another thing that's traditional for Mexican culture is to have Mariachis at the burial, but because of COVID, we couldn't. It didn't feel right to not have music played for my mom, so I improvised at the last minute. I asked my friend to bring me my car and I hooked up my phone and blasted the traditional funeral songs because it was the least she deserved.

On people denying that COVID is real...

It's honestly really shocking to me. I don't know how people can say that something we experienced isn't real. When my mom passed, we were at about 200,000 deaths. Today (January 2021), we're almost at 400,000. I constantly ask myself, how many more have to die before people take this seriously? I'm just saddened by the disregard for the lives of others that I see every day. When I see people out and about at bars celebrating it leaves me speechless because this pandemic could have been controlled, and so many lives could have been saved. I want people who don't take this seriously to know that what we experienced was horrifying. They don't want to have to say goodbye to their loved ones through FaceTime and watch as they gasp for air. When I see people downplaying this virus, it's beyond anger. I don't know what it will take. But I hope people really, really understand and it gets through their head that this could happen to them.

On her father getting COVID a few months later...

We got some really devastating news towards the end of December that my dad had contracted COVID. When he told us he tested positive, it was like reliving that nightmare. In my head, I was like, "Why? Why is this happening? Why is it targeting my family?" My dad's birthday was actually on New Year's Eve and I remember we all got on a conference call and sang Happy Birthday through the phone. Doing that brought back a lot of horrible memories. Thankfully, God listened to us and

gave us a break. My dad was able to walk out of the hospital and he's at home recovering, he has gained most of his health back. We're just so lucky that he was able to make it through. We were just so blessed that his story was different.

On what she wants other people to know about having a parent die of COVID...

I want everyone to know this was real and we lived it. It's something I don't wish on anyone because it's going to take an entire lifetime to heal from this. I want them to know that her life mattered. That she was a person in this world. She isn't just a number. None of the COVID victims should be seen as just a number. They were mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles and siblings from all walks of life. They existed and they mattered and they deserved better. We have to honor our loved ones by telling their individual stories. I want anyone who has lost someone to COVID to be extra kind to themselves, because what happened is something we may never understand. We are having to grieve in an unusual way and it's okay to not be okay after that. It's something that no one could have prepared us for. You have every right to be confused, upset, angry, sad when you see others downplaying the severity of this. And it's important to take a break from social media and drown out the noise because your priority is your peace. You have to protect your peace. And you have to focus on your own healing, which is the most important thing right now.



The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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This resource was funded by the Brave of Heart Fund, founded by the Foundations of New York Life and Cigna and administered by E4E Relief. The Brave of Heart Fund was established in 2020 to provide charitable grants and emotional support services to families of the frontline healthcare workers, volunteers, and support staff whose lives were lost in the fight against COVID-19. It continues to offer support to these bereaved families via partnerships with non-profit organizations aligned with the fund's core purposes.

employeerelieffund.org/brave-of-heart-fund