

# Journey Through the Unknown

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I am an “expert”. I spent my life studying infectious disease: how to test for it, how to prevent it, and how to control it. I have read case studies and understand what went wrong in past outbreaks. I helped the state respond to the 2009 flu pandemic. I know what questions to ask and can predict the general progression of a pandemic. These things have a familiar pattern. We can study trends and anticipate future directions.

I, of all people, should be able to avoid getting COVID-19. I understand aseptic technique, how viruses are spread, and how to clean and disinfect surfaces. I also know that viruses are not magic. They follow the rules of Biology. It takes the right circumstances to infect someone. If anyone should be able to protect themselves and provide advice, it should be me.

During the COVID 19 pandemic, I found myself as lost as anyone else, and I was searching for answers. What precautions should we take? I knew any surface could contain virus, so I obsessively washed and sanitized my hands after touching anything. I knew the death rate was only about 2% but I also knew young healthy people were dying. I knew masks could provide some protection long before they became the required accessory of 2020, but I didn't know if they were enough protection to allow me to live my life as before. Should I go to the grocery store? Was that an acceptable risk? Could I meet others outside for drinks? Could we share food? I knew it would take just one slip and I could become infected. Did I really need that snack from the convince store? Every decision required weighing the risk and the reward of that choice.

Friends and family were asking what to do, and I really didn't know. Why was my knowledge and experience not enough? Why was this advice so hard to give? Why did people ignore what I said and did what they wanted anyway? It was hard to tell family and friends that we shouldn't gather for Thanksgiving. It was hard to spend Christmas alone while my wife went to Florida to visit her mother. Were these events worth the risk? How could I advise someone else what to do? How could I tell them how to weigh their own personal risk/reward equation? I found myself without any good answers for myself or those who asked.

The emotional toll of being constantly on alert for something you couldn't even see became draining. The inability to have a clear path forward was unsettling. I wondered if I was over-reacting or under-reacting. People all around me seemed to go on as normal with no dire consequences.

I knew all along we would make it through this as a species, as a society; but no one knew how long it would last or what the final outcome would be. We still don't, but as we begin to emerge out of the other end, what stays with me is the feeling of uncertainty and confusion—even for an “expert”. I can't imagine what trying to make these same decisions was like for everyone else.

