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Stories from a contact tracer: The unwelcome gift

BY SOCIETY FOR DISASTER
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One of the byproducts of the coronavirus pandemic has been the popularization of terms traditionally known only to epidemiologists and public health officials. “Flattening the curve” and “contact tracing” have joined the common phraseology. What has yet to enter the public’s consciousness is the stress created for the anonymous public health workers tracking COVID-19. This anxiety became obvious with research being conducted by the Society for Disaster Medicine and Public Health.

The telling of these stories is complicated by the need to protect the identities of those affected by the virus and of the contact

tracers. Many of them have lessons for the public. This is one such tale.

In late December, Haley flew to her dad’s house out West. She had grown homesick as the holidays approached. Despite pleas from her family to stay put for Christmas, she took a long flight back to her old stomping grounds and visited her dad and sister. Long lines awaited her at baggage check. She missed her direct flight and got re-booked on a flight with a plane change.

Fast forward to another long line just three days later, this time waiting for brunch at a ski lodge. Haley joined her younger sister Lizzie in line; it took longer than 30 minutes to be served. The two sisters were delighted with the wonderful brunch and visiting with friends. They

were oblivious to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention risk message: you can catch COVID-19 from “15 minutes (indoors) in a 24 hour period, (even) masking and spacing six feet apart” — if the space is small enough, and there are enough sick people shedding virus.

The sisters reported to the tracer that they did their best to stay distanced. “But, everyone wears face masks. We’ll be fine. Don’t worry.” Later that evening, the sisters could be found in a social media posting showing them in a picturesque woodland scene — a winter wonderland all around. There was one thing missing from Haley’s beautiful face: her mask.

Haley’s symptoms began on Christmas Eve: a cough, fatigue and a headache — all easily attributed to the

higher altitude and the excitement of the season. She didn’t tell her family about her symptoms during their conversations that night. The following day, Lizzie felt something “weird” with her tongue and noted she could not taste or smell. Everyone at their dad’s home piled into the car (wearing masks this time) and got rapid tested. Three out of the four people were positive. Two days later, the last person in the car got sick and tested positive.

The blessing of good health in 2021 proved to be elusive for Haley’s family. There were reasons to think they could stay safe. The father had recently been vaccinated. The sisters assured their mother that they had masks on as they hung out with their childhood friends.

A long-time friend of the mother, who the sisters knew, recently died from COVID-19, three weeks after attending an indoor dinner party. The sisters knew the risks. So, what happened?

Life. Impulsive decisions in 20-something brains “happened.” The assumption of safety in a familiar environment, being with friends and family, celebrating the holidays outside in the mountains “happened.”

Where was the exposure? The contact tracer first suspected the crowded lines at the restaurant. Another exposure could have been during the airplane flights and crowded airports. They could not rule out a third exposure, that of the family get-togethers at home.

Are there lessons to be learned? Yes. Crowds contribute to the spread of respiratory diseases. Hiking or skiing outdoors near others for extended periods of time without a mask is risky. Social distancing can be effective to lower your exposure to the virus in an

indoor setting, but not remove it entirely. The vaccines take at least two weeks before antibodies develop, and you need two doses for full effectiveness. Even then, there is no guarantee that you may not become infected or spread the virus. Family gatherings are an efficient means for spreading COVID-19.

The greatest lesson is that no one is exempt from getting sick from COVID-19. If you play around with risk, the people you love may get sick because of your actions. The contact tracer noted “I know these risks and hear these stories every day. I knew these sisters and hoped that they would not become part of the stories of COVID-19. I was wrong.”

The Society for Disaster Medicine and Public Health is dedicated to promotion and advancement of excellence in disaster medicine and public health across a broad global, multi-professional membership.

Alexei Navalny is resisting Putin

