

Taking Care of My Grandma During COVID

In July of 2019, I started working for my grandma as a job after I graduated college. I was in great need of some form of work, and I was fortunate to have a way to earn money while figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. When I started, I did not have much experience with the elderly, but having lived with my other grandparents while in college, I had some idea. Outside of that, I had some babysitting experience, but that was not the age group I was to be working with.

At first, it was a bit of a struggle. I wasn't entirely sure of what I was doing. I was blessed by having other family members guide me. My mom, as well as aunts and uncles, gave me explicit directions and I would give reports back to them on how I was doing. As time went on, I learned how to make quick meals, increase my customer service skills, and even how to do physical therapy.

2019 was a hard year for my grandma. She fell a few times, which included breaking her leg and her back on different occasions. Additionally, she got a bad case of pneumonia, in which an ambulance had to come and get her, since she was too weak to walk. After one of her long stints in the hospital, I was taught by a physical therapist on how to care for my grandma. We started to do exercises daily to make sure she could maintain her muscles. At times, I had to coax my grandma into doing some exercises by saying that she could not go to her hair appointments if she couldn't do certain movements.

In March of 2020, the pandemic hit the United States. My own life was not that drastically different, aside from feeling more trapped than I did before. In those months during lockdown, the only places I could really go were work or home. It was as if I were a prisoner, without having done a crime. The isolation and the feeling of not being able to go places as freely caused me to have a large mental breakdown in April of 2020.

April of 2020 was one of the hardest months for me mentally. My anxiety was through the roof, and one of my only solaces were my husband, and having work for my grandma. Working for my grandma helped me not feel useless, and my husband offered the emotional support in all the rapid changes going on. I must mention, however, that in February of 2020, I lost another cousin to suicide, and that compounded with the stress of COVID made this burden large. In April, that suicide was still fresh in my mind.

Other things that stressed me out during COVID were things like food shortages, and the feeling that the restrictions would never end. Having a steady income from working for my grandma helped me feel more stable in a time of uncertainty. Another stressor was the sheer sameness of every single day. While I was grateful to have some constants in my life, it became like a Groundhog Day loop after some time. Same time for work, same needs and wants from my grandma, and the same people every single day. There was no real spontaneity, and it was something that I missed from the pre-COVID era. I couldn't simply just go to a store I wanted to go to, or make a late-night grocery run for ice cream. Those small things were what I missed.

This had nothing to do with taking care of my grandma, but these things that were on my mind impacted how I felt at work.

I couldn't take it anymore, and by some point in April, I had a mental breakdown in front of my husband. I couldn't stop crying about feeling trapped and that there was no escape. This prompted my husband to drive me to a burger place and get things through the drive-thru to feel like I had other things to look forward to in life. We ate in the parking lot across from our apartment to make it feel like I was somewhere other than home or work.

Speaking of food, I think one of my grandma's only joys later in life was food. She was not well enough to go and do things she used to do. I made an effort to give her food she enjoyed. When it was just me and her, I remember making grilled cheese and tomato soup often. It was one of her favorite foods. There was a time I made a homemade tomato soup that I brought with me to work, and she told me it was some of the best tomato soup she had. Another time, I made a salmon dish from a meal kit, and she commented that it was "very delicious." She didn't really use descriptors that well at her old age, so she would call things either "delicious" or "very delicious." My parents ended up making fun of it in private due to her saying it about nearly everything. A time I was noticeably annoyed though was when I transitioned to doing more frozen meals for lunch at my parent's request. She told me she hated the pot pies I kept serving, but by that point, my family had been giving them to her for weeks with no complaint. I wished she had communicated that to me earlier. She was very funny about food. You could get take-out from Panda Express, and she would call it "very delicious," but you could spend forty-five minutes making a nice risotto topped with steak, and she wouldn't be impressed. Maybe her tastes were just simpler than my own, but that was frustrating. Another funny thing she would do would claim the penne you made was from Panda Express. Her mind was really fading, but it was something I look back on in good humor. Most of all, she really loved burgers and milkshakes from In-n-Out. It wouldn't be often, but when she did get it, you could feel the happiness.

With the boredom I felt working for my grandma at times, and with COVID still going strong, I decided to apply for graduate school at ASU. I sent in my submission, and a few weeks later, I got into the history program. I was to start in the fall semester of 2020. Balancing school and work was something I did not have to really think about in my undergraduate program, so this was new territory for me. There were times where I had a few close calls, but I was able to stay on top of my schooling. The free time I had at work allowed me to get some reading done here and there, though it wasn't always easy to concentrate, as my grandma could call me at any random time for help, interrupting my studies. It is why I would typically do my work after I was done for the day with my grandma.

One thing that I ended up doing while working for my grandma was working holidays. I ended up working many holidays that some people would get time off for, but in my mind, if it helped out my other family members by giving them time with their kids, it was worth it. I would work on holidays like the Martin Luther King Day, President's Day, and the Fourth of July. I discovered that it wasn't that bad, and if I could earn extra money while doing so, there was

no issue. Caring for my grandma also made me want to ensure that someone was there for her even if other people weren't there.

My grandma was a very quiet person. She was never super talkative in her younger years either, but age took a toll on her mind and body. When I made meals for her, occasionally I would try and strike up a conversation, but my interests didn't always align with hers. One time I do remember was talking to her about World War II. I had been watching a World War II documentary and it prompted me to ask my grandma questions about that time. My grandma told me that she remembered a Japanese boy crying in her class when Pearl Harbor happened. She said that he would later grow up to help fight in the Korean War, where he died. She started to even shed a few tears recounting that memory. I didn't want to press too far, as I understood it was a sensitive topic for her. We had some lighter conversations too. She complimented my cooking skills a time or two, saying I would do a good job on one of the cooking competitions she watched. Another time, I remember her laughing as I was taking care of the oranges that fell off her trees in the backyard. It was a hot day, and was a bit annoying that I had to use my bare hands to do it. I wasn't that amused, but my grandma sure was. I didn't say anything to her, as I wanted to be a good worker.

My grandma's hair appointments were every Thursday. Part of that job included making sure her bag was where she wanted it and getting out the stepstool to get in the car. When COVID happened, another thing I had to do was put her mask on a small table for her so she would remember it. My parents were living with my grandma by that point, as they moved in around January of 2020. Masks were hard to come by, at least the higher quality ones. Since my dad is doctor, he was able to have a bulk supply of N95 masks, which was greatly needed for my grandma. When lockdowns eased, but masks were still required, I would see her put on her mask right before going out the door to go to her appointment. I find masks to be cumbersome, so I was glad my grandma wasn't made to wear one at all times. She rarely went outside of her home unless it was to visit family, go to church, or go to her hair appointment. I have a feeling that lockdown life was not that different from her time before lockdowns.

My parents were a bit different living with my grandma. During COVID, I remember seeing my mom clean off surfaces obsessively. At the time, many of us were unaware of how easily you could catch COVID from surface touch. I don't blame my mom for being that way. My mom also didn't go to as many places as I did. My dad attempted to make homemade hand sanitizer due to the shortages. I just remember my hands getting dried out from the endless washing and hand sanitizer, but I was afraid of spreading things to my grandma. I eventually did an impulse buy of a bunch of hand cream after my hands got so cracked any dry. It felt like living in a hospital with the smells of cleaning supplies being omnipotent through those few months of COVID.

I did not work on Sundays, but there were times I would go over to my grandma's house to have church. One of my favorite times was when my brother was available to do the sacrament outside on the back porch of my grandma's house. It gave some semblance of normalcy. My brother had to go back to Utah a few weeks later, but that short time of having

that available made it memorable. Church became an online thing the following months into COVID. I would sometimes go to my grandma's house to watch church through that method. My grandma would sleep a lot through the sessions, but I couldn't really give her much grief for that. I had trouble staying engaged in church meetings by being limited to looking at a screen. After a while, I just gave it up and decided to go back to church when it was offered in-person again. The times of going back to church in-person felt weird. People had to wear masks, and you couldn't really sing. There was a short time when they weren't necessary, but once they got reinstated, I stopped going to church until the restrictions lifted. I didn't stop believing in the church, and in that time of being away, I got to really know why it was so important. I came back once my mom said that the mask mandates weren't as strong any longer. Coming back, I felt as if my soul got filled. A part of me that was missing had reappeared. My grandma, however, was never able to return to church in-person like I got to.

2021 was a year of changes. In May of 2021, I was released from my work. My parents decided to move out. They wanted to move back to their apartment, and so my grandma was put in a nursing home with accommodations that she needed. She ended up getting rid of much of her stuff with the house being sold. Part of me was sad to have to leave my grandma. I had come to appreciate the steady work, enjoyed helping her with physical therapy, and learned to work harder. Some of the things I took with me included book ends made from part of a temple, a cookbook, an apron my aunt made for my grandma (which she told me my grandma didn't really like), and a cooking pan I loved while making meals for my grandma. I still use these things and think of my grandma. After I was released, I would never see my grandma alive again.

When my job ended, I was left again with the struggle of coming up with more work. I was lucky that a woman that worked different shifts for my grandma, as she knew someone in need. She recommended me to the family, and since then, I have worked for them. I don't have as many hours as I used to, but the savings I developed working for my grandma allowed me to support myself. My husband was the one making most of the money, but I was able to help pay for some of the food through my savings. The savings have been a blessing, and it gave me the luxury of devoting more time to my studies through paying for a meal delivery service. The meals were kits that I had to cook myself, but the ingredients all being there and premeasured made it less stressful.

Another thing I started after my job ended was learning to drive. I started by driving for an hour a day for five days a week. It was another thing to fill my days, as my work wasn't as demanding as it used to be. My anxiety was more well-managed at that point in time. The pandemic taught me better coping mechanisms, such as filling my day with tasks to avoid falling into a pit of stress. The hour a day forced me to get ready in the morning like I would for my job, and did wonders for my mental health. One perk I loved about this was getting to talk to my mom more. Our relationship grew closer from it, and it was something I would end up being excited for more than the driving. After many months of practice, I got my license on June 24, 2022.

January 16, 2022 was when my grandma died. I am still trying to process it, as I felt like I never got a proper goodbye. Given the health problems she had in the time I took care of her, I was honestly surprised she made it as long as she did. At some points, I was convinced she wouldn't make it through 2020. In a conversation with my dad, he told me that it would be more merciful for her to die given the circumstances. He told me this in 2020. I agreed, as it was hard to see my grandma live in so much pain, and with such limited mobility. One thing that has kept me in good spirits is the knowledge that my grandma is with her husband again. I never met my grandpa, as he died a few years before I was born. It is actually one of the things that gives me faith in an afterlife, as I want to see family that I never got the chance to meet in this life. My grandma had been without my grandpa for longer than I have been alive, and to know that she is back with him gives me comfort. My conversations with her about her husband were very sad, as I could tell she missed him.

Going to her funeral, she was back at church again, but this time deceased. I couldn't bring myself to see her super close up in her casket, as I wanted to remember more of what she was like when alive. Something I will always remember was her homemade bread and jam. One of these days, I am going to ask one of my family members for some of her recipes to recreate it. Part of me wishes I took more time to talk to her, but given her general personality, it may not have been very successful at the age she was. She was easier to talk to prior to her health issues, and I recollect my time with her as younger kid. It was what kept me going, even if I felt that she was hard to work with regularly due to communication issues. She was a complex person, and it is my hope that she is happier in a place back with her other family members and her husband. It would be hard to continue without my husband, so I could only imagine how she felt for so many years.

This essay is to help retain the memories of my grandma, as well as a chronicle of taking care of an elderly person during the height of COVID. For anyone that is reading this in the future, I want you to write down memories you have of people in your life so they are kept safe. COVID for me is associated with taking care of my grandma. Having someone to look after, even if they weren't always grateful for it, made me feel more confident on starting my own family. I know that kids are different from elderly people, but the care is similar. Both age groups won't always say "thank you" after feeding them, or acknowledge the work you put in. It helped me understand the capacity I have to love others. Working for my grandma changed my life and gave me a chance to get work experience that I would have had a harder time getting. It was my first real job, and one I look back on fondly. This was hard for me to write, but also necessary. I want my grandma to be remembered, and I look forward to future historians reading this and using it as one of the many pieces of tile, in the mosaic that are the social, emotional, and mental impacts of COVID.