

Nick and Kyle
COVID-19 Autoethnography
2021

Through the Eyes of Assimilation: Immigrant Families, Mental Illness, and COVID-19

Introduction

There are many points in this story where the focus can shine a light on disparities affecting my family prior to COVID-19. These hardships turn into dark chasms as COVID-19 swept across the country taking millions of lives. These types of disparities do not only affect my family and myself. This story is not about how horrible everything was or how difficult life can be. It is about perseverance because if there is one person that I admire more than anyone and who has survived so much, it is my mom. Through her life, through her illness, and through COVID-19.

Background

I am a product of two immigrant families, for the sake of time and purpose of this story, I will focus on my mother's side. Since this story is mostly about my mom who was born in Armenia and came to this country in 1964 by way of Egypt where she stayed with family for a short time before traveling to the US. My mom tells me that this was an ongoing endeavor for her family that started with her uncle and continued after he passed away. She never told me how he died only that after he had died that his two sisters continued to help the family leave Armenia. Many details of my mother's life in Armenia or parts of my childhood are obscured by my mom's perception of the world because she has Bipolar Disorder. She was diagnosed with Postpartum Psychosis when my brother was born in 1982. In the next few years she went from being a brilliant woman, being the first in her family to obtain a Bachelor's degree and working as an Electrical Engineer to being unable to work or function due to her severe mental health disorder. My mom applied for Social Security Disability and was denied. My parents were never told the reason and my father did not

understand because she obtained her citizenship prior to applying. It was not until years later and legal assistance that she was able to obtain the disability assistance she needed. My mother's diagnosis did not change to Bipolar Disorder until 1997 when she received care from a new psychiatrist.

Since the age of 7, I have been caring and advocating for my mom's healthcare. My father was able to be available during an emergency but his understanding and communication skills during a psychiatric emergency could use some assistance. This is not to any fault of his own as many people do not know how to navigate the needs of people with mental health issues and de-escalate a situation during a mental health crisis. Being my mother's child and the oldest, I had to learn how to handle various situations. My dad worked a lot to support the family and being around someone who had a severe mental illness, I learned how to adapt. This is not to say that I was left alone when my mom was having these difficulties, there were always other family members present. I was not told my mom had a mental illness at the time, only that sometimes my mom did odd things. I was told to make sure that I get a family member if my mom said something or did something that made me feel uncomfortable. You will understand what I mean by uncomfortable in the following event.

One specific situation that happened randomly over the years in my early childhood was due to my mom's paranoia. She believed people were after my father and to protect myself and/or my brother, she would take us for "walks." These walks happened mostly in the middle of the night and would take us through side streets, woods, people's homes (what I thought to be abandoned because no one was ever home), and sometimes a taxi ride. She would be heading to my grandparents apartment in Forest Hills, Queens. Other times she would be found at the local store where the police would bring her back home. I can remember walking through other people's homes at the age of 7, which is the only incident I can clearly remember, felt "uncomfortable".

I share this now because if it had happened during COVID-19, it would be a very different story. Typically, back in the late 1980's, if my mom ran into some issues with other people in the community the police were called and they brought her home. From my knowledge the only times she was hospitalized due to her mental health was after speaking to the psychiatrist with my father. The psychiatrist would have her admitted for her safety and treatment. I fear if this same scenario would have happened in more recent times, during COVID-19, I do not know where my mom would end up. Thankfully, she has been stable for longer periods of time in the last 20 years.

I have found memories on the occasional holiday of making manta with my mom's side of the family. Manta are small dumplings made with lamb in the center. My family typically puts the dumplings in a soup with yogurt but I've seen it made with tomato sauce. I just about put yogurt in everything as a result of my Armenian background and manta, lahmacun (which is a flatbread with meat and spices on it), are some of my favorite foods. I feel like this is my only connection to my cultural background. Unfortunately, my parents believed in assimilation and I think so did my grandparents because my brother, cousin's and myself were discouraged from learning any language spoken at home, in my case it was Armenian and Sicilian. This caused issues later in life when my mom became ill and was speaking Armenian and English. I was unable to translate. There are typically some types of translation services available in a hospital. Some people may be wondering what the issue is with this. The truth of the matter is that this does not mean that if a person is having a psychiatric emergency, in the hospital or out, a person is going to get these services.

COVID in Bushwick

We were hearing sirens what seemed like all through every night at our home in Bushwick. Anytime we passed the hospital a couple of blocks away, the four refrigerated trailers that they were using as morgues for COVID-infected bodies haunted whatever conversation we were

having. There were stories all over the news and social media of people dying completely alone because their loved ones were not allowed to be with them due to precautions. Some nurses would get a person's family on Facetime for them to say goodbye, but the deaths in isolation pervaded our worries more. So, when Nick got the news that his mom was in the hospital, my heart dropped.

Nick has been the caretaker in his family since he was a little kid. Throughout his mother's ailments, he's learned how to adeptly navigate the healthcare and mental health systems on Long Island. This was all before his transition though, which would prove to complicate communicative issues as he attempted to advocate for his mom from afar. The hospital wasn't horrible with Nick's dad, or with Nick. They answered as many questions as they could when we could actually get them on the phone, but they were so overloaded with the exponential influx of COVID patients that this proved to be a near-impossible task. After a couple of weeks, Nick's mom was moved to a rehabilitation facility, and this is where the real trouble began.

COVID-19 Positive

My mom was hospitalized after collapsing for an unknown reason. She was so weak my dad could not help her up, and he had to wait for the paramedics. We did not know what was happening. My dad said that they would not let him go to the hospital and they would not treat her until her Coronavirus test came back. It took three days, and no one knew what was happening with my mom. I could not get through to anyone. Eventually we were told she tested positive. She was treated at the hospital and then sent to a Rehabilitation Center. The Rehab is where the real problems started. We had no contact, and no one would talk to me. My mom has difficulty operating her phone because of her mental and physical health. I was worried my mom was not going to make it, she had smoke for years, had a brain aneurysm, stroke and neurological issues as a result. It was horrifying. For as long as I could remember, I was always the emergency contact. They had me down, yet they would not speak to me. I did not understand what was happening.

Getting Somewhere

Nick is consistently listed as a contact for his mother so that medical and psychiatric providers will talk to him. Unfortunately, he hasn't yet changed his legal name and his physical gender transition can cause some dissonance between him and gender norms and expectations. When Nick began to talk to the rehab that his mom was in, they didn't believe his voice belonged to the person listed and refused to talk to him despite his explanations of being trans. They avoided his calls and kept telling him to tell his mom to add him to the list. Between his mom's bipolar disorder, a history of neurological issues, and a language barrier, this just wasn't going to happen. Because of the combination of being horribly worried about his mother and kept in the dark about her condition, as well as events triggering gender dysphoria, Nick was having a really hard time and struggling to keep up with schoolwork.

After a certain point, it becomes useless to continue talking to the same ignorant people over and over. So, I looked up the place Nick's mom was at on Facebook and messaged the manager. At the same time, we looked up New York State law around ombudsmen and advocacy, and emailed them as well. When the manager got back to me, he knew exactly who and what I was talking about and updated me, over Facebook, that Nick's mom was alright. I was jarred at the rehab staff's reluctance to talk to Nick over the phone because of confusion around his gender, and the contrast of this man speaking so easily to me about someone who isn't actually yet family, especially where I was NOT on the list. Finally, we were making headway and Nick was able to get a full report from the nurse on his mom's floor.

Conclusion

Thankfully, Nick's mom pulled through. We're at the end of the pandemic now, and fortunate not to have lost anyone close to us. A great many people did lose someone, sometimes whole families.

Isolation has been good for us, but not others. Despite this isolation, or perhaps in part because of it, there have been numerous uprising in the States and around the world. Where we stand now, the world has logged over 150,000,000 cases and 3.2 million deaths. India is in shambles with little hope for respite in the near future. The vaccine is starting to slow things down: over a trillion doses have been administered and New York City just announced a full reopening by July first. This doesn't erase what has happened here, and certainly not the lives lost.