

*Original Research*

## **Psychosocial, Physical, and Physiological (3 P's) Experiences: Looking Through the Eyes of COVID-19 Survivors**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The quick and alarming increments of COVID-19 affirmed cases has produced serious morbidity and mortality crises to the vast majority around the world. The dread in the circumstance today has brought about catastrophic effects, health-related issues, and even abuse by individuals in the general public notwithstanding the physical and physiological experiences and domains. This study was conducted to determine and explore the psychosocial, physical, and physiological experiences of COVID-19 survivors. It also revealed the coping mechanisms and post-COVID experiences of the respondents. This qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological approach to contextualize and explore the various domains in the experiences of COVID-19 survivors. Data were investigated and analyzed using thematic construct analysis as deemed appropriate to identify themes and concepts associated with the experiences. Three themes emerged specifically: Macro- and Micro-experiences of COVID-19 survivors, the journey towards recovery, and transformation and modification as means to survive. The study revealed various physiological and psychosocial emotions such as the disgust and distant reaction of the people around the COVID-19 patients in addition to their loneliness and distress during their isolation. The study also highlighted the resilience of COVID-19 survivors, wherein most of the participants have shared how they strived to get their life back to normal after surviving the infection. The researchers have concluded that family played the most significant role in the journey of the patients towards recovery. The COVID-19 infection impacted the life of the survivors in many ways.

Keywords: pandemic, psychoeducation, coping mechanism, post-COVID, health education.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid increase of COVID-19 confirmed cases has imposed distress to most people globally. The fear in the situation today has resulted in mistreatment by people in the society in addition to

the physical and physiological experiences of the patients. Health care workers as well cannot get away from these. People who are suffering from the disease, those who handle and take care of them, and other frontliners experienced discrimination and

difficulties in the society resulting from lack of knowledge and misinformation. An illness, infection, or any condition which affects the normal processes of the body must be understood well. Information about this must be properly taught and disseminated to a community to avoid any prejudice. In times of an outbreak, people will panic less and will rather take precautionary measures. Stigma on certain illnesses have been occurring since a long time ago which have resulted in unequal treatment for some people. Fortunately, there has been increasing and growing advocacies which aim to end these horrible experiences and free the patients from it. Additionally, proper propagation of information to the public would allow them to better understand the situation of infected persons. Adequate knowledge is an important constituent to create and achieve an environment where each individual can live on their own and freely without trouble of being misjudged by others just because of their condition. Moreover, the support coming from close contacts especially from the family would certainly aid in the recovery of patients.

Coronaviruses (CoVs) are from the subfamily Coronavirinae of the family Coronaviridae of the order Nidovirales (Wang et al., 2020). Members are enveloped and possess remarkably large single stranded RNA genomes ranging from 26 to 32 kilobases in length. CoVs have been identified in several avian hosts and various mammals, including bats, camels, dogs and masked palm civets. Until the emergence of coronavirus caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome in late 2002, CoVs are known to only induce mild disease to people whose immune systems are weakened or compromised (Zheng, 2020). Coronavirus disease, commonly known as COVID-19, first occurred and reported in Wuhan,

Hubei, Province of China in early December 2019. Early cases were then referred to as “pneumonia of unknown etiology”, similar to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 (Wang et al., 2020). According to the World Health Organization (2020), COVID-19 is transmitted through direct, indirect, and close contact with those infected via mouth and nose secretions. Indirect transmission occurs when a carrier or infected person contaminates objects and surfaces which are then used or touched by other people afterwards. Secretions include saliva and those coming from the respiratory tract or droplets. Infected individuals may experience fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of sense of taste and smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea.

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic affected the whole world in several aspects – physically, mentally, socially, economically, and the overall health of each individual. Today, many have been suffering due to hunger caused by loss of jobs, insufficient resources, and limited aid from the government. Human mobility is lessened and is restricted to social distancing to lower the risk of acquiring the disease. Education, work, and business establishments are widely affected. Almost everything, from delivery of service to learning, shifted through the use of online platforms and other ways just to continue lives and abide by this new normal. Mentally, people are also having a hard time enduring the situation. With this sudden lifestyle change, people experienced different challenges which also affected their domains on psychosocial, physical, physiological aspects.

Coronavirus disease cases in the country have been continuously increasing even as of today. Due to prolonged quarantine and less opportunities and activities, this pandemic tremendously impacted not only the patients but the general population also. The field of medical technology education is working to identify the lived experiences of individuals particularly, COVID-19 survivors while in isolation. The initiation of this study would allow the institution to expand its knowledge and perspective based on realism and to better understand how services can be efficiently delivered to patients. Information would not be confined to only one, rather, shared to others to realize the real phenomenon occurring today.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological approach to contextualize and explore the various domains in the experiences of COVID-19 survivors. The study was qualitative since it inquired the perception and experiences of the COVID-19 survivors that were determined, described, analyzed. The study utilized a validated semi structured in-depth online interviews with 19 individuals who survived from COVID-19 from two regions, NCR and Region IV-A CALABARZON who were chosen utilizing non-probability sampling technique, purposive sampling towards identification of participants as well the variables in order to gather informative, reliable and accurate data.

### **Selection of Participants**

The study excluded minors ages below 18 years and only concentrated on adult participants. It was ensured that respondents were capable of answering and narrating their own experiences

without the help of any family members and other people. Moreover, the means of communication was also considered if the participants have the means of communication and other necessities to undergo the interview such as internet connection, e-mail account, and mobile phone or laptop.

### **Survey Design**

Open ended questions were formulated wherein it was structured as a semi structured interview and were utilized as the primary instrument in data collection to explore the experiences by COVID-19 survivors. Open-ended questions served as a method for respondents to freely answer and narrate their experiences. Likewise, follow-up questions were also constructed and used, when necessary, to encourage participants to elaborate on or clarify a response. This tool allowed the respondents to properly detail their stories for validation and accuracy. The set of guide questions served as the basis for the researchers to collect information that had to be carried out in the study. This has allowed the researchers to thoroughly understand the respondents' complex perceptions in terms of their coping strategies and experiences. The research instrument revolved in relation to the objectives of the study which was to impart the in-depth experiences of COVID-19 patients during the course of infection. The series of guide questions allowed the researchers to consider how family involvement, societal perception, personal aspects and other long-term effects have imposed impacts on COVID-19 patients' psychosocial, physical, and physiological domains. The researchers made sure of the reliability of the participants as the semi-structured interview was made mainly for COVID-19

survivors only and only the COVID-19 survivors could answer the questions provided.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The researchers and respondents primarily communicated through the use of messenger application and email prior to the said interview as person-to-person contact was prohibited to ensure the safety of everyone involved in the study. Before having the participants answer the researchers' prepared questionnaire, informed consent was obtained from each and every participant since this study entailed sensitive cases in consideration that COVID-19 made a huge impact especially with them and that a comprehensive and coherent approach was essential. No participant was in any way forced or obligated to participate in the study. Before signing the consent form, detailed information was given to the participants without showing any partiality. The participants were also informed on the importance of their views, and to answer the prepared questionnaire with honesty and according to their knowledge, awareness and perception. Participants were also assured of privacy and confidentiality, that the information collected would only be accessible to the researchers. Data gathering took place only after the respondent signed the consent form.

### **Data Collection**

Figure 1 illustrates the successive process of the actual data gathering that was accomplished by the researchers before and after the actual gathering of data.

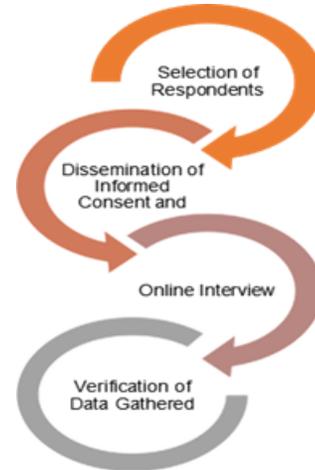


Figure 1. Successive Process of Actual Data Gathering

Participants were recruited through contact from acquaintances and some close relatives. In reaching out to the following respondents, the researchers coordinated with them using different social media platforms such as messenger as it is one of communication and e-mail in order to properly disseminate and orient the respondents' extent and purpose of participation. In accordance with safety measurements and parameters, since it is pandemic and face to face interaction is not allowed, the researchers had followed certain safety protocols, hence, communication was settled to this sort of stage to stay in contact for additional inquiry and to keep the well-being of both parties. Consent from the participants has been acquired as well as some important information that helped validate their involvement. The participants were informed beforehand that online platforms such as google meet and zoom will be utilized for the interview. However, the researchers have given options in case they were unfamiliar with these applications. All of them have agreed to one of the two aforementioned platforms. Prior to the interview, respondents were given a

reminder of their schedule for confirmation and to verify whether there were no circumstances that would hinder them from participating.

The interview was held virtually which approximately lasted for 30 minutes at maximum for every respondent. COVID-19 survivors personally told their insights and stories which were important components in attaining research objectives. The participants were given three open-ended questions. However, the researchers as well asked follow-up questions for elaboration and clarifications.

After the interview with the respondents, the transcriptions of the responses were made and were thematically analyzed. Data were coded, categorized, and themed according to the appropriateness of the answer. It was ensured that no participants were harmed during the interview.

### Data Analysis

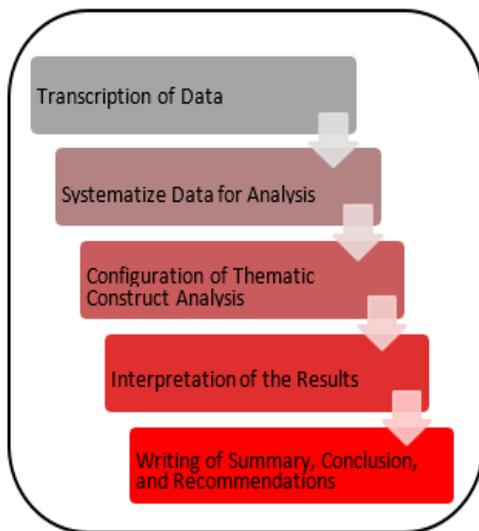


Figure 2. Step-by-Step Process in Data Analysis

After gathering all the primary data, a qualitative approach was applied for its analysis. The results were taken and systematized accordingly, and transcription of data was done to ensure the accuracy and validity of the responses. The researchers imparted a thematic construct analysis after the transcription has been made. Substantial responses were tabulated inline under its corresponding objectives. Codes and categories were specifically given to each utterance. Themes were drawn up after the evaluation of categories which would correlate the similarities between responses to answer the main problem for satisfaction and attainment of the findings.

Bracketing was done to ensure the validity of the study where all researchers' perceptions were suspended to prevent it from the influence it may cause in the analysis. In addition, iteration of the process produced the same analysis and results.

### Results and Discussion

Data were investigated using thematic construct analysis. Three themes emerged specifically: Macro- and Micro experiences of COVID-19 survivors, The Journey Towards Recovery, and Transformation and Modification as Means to Survive.

Moreover, six subthemes have been identified from the collective responses of participants.

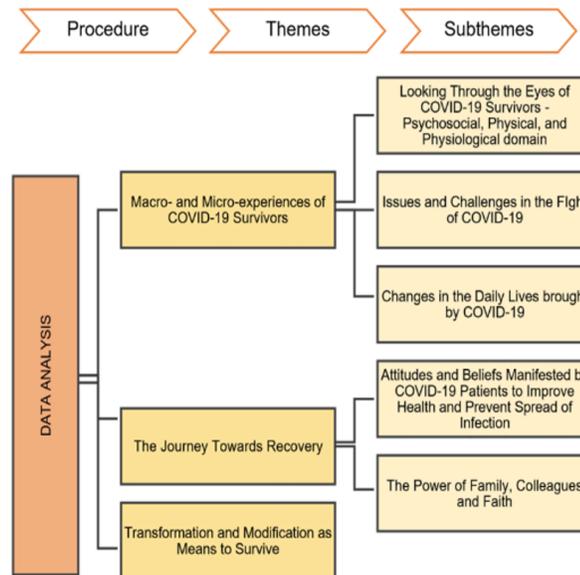


Figure 3. Themes and Sub-themes from the Thematic Construct Analysis Macro- and Micro-experiences of COVID-19 survivors

The experiences shared by COVID 19 survivors were perceived in a general setting or macro level. While observation on utterances was made on a micro level. All details were considered even the smallest ones from the onset of infection until the survival of the participants. Based on the research findings of Knestrick et al. (2021), physical experiences of COVID-19 survivors include extreme fatigue, loss of sense of taste and smell, fever, brain fog, and weight loss. As mentioned by Cornell (2020), symptomatic patients of COVID-19 might show different kinds of symptoms. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) stated that these symptoms may present within two to fourteen days of exposure which include fever, cough, and trouble breathing. At first, they thought it was just a simple fever, but their body was weak. It has come to realize that those pains are the manifestations of COVID-19. According to CDC (2021), there are several symptoms of COVID-19 ranging from mild to severe. These symptoms appear for about two to

fourteen days after exposure to the virus. Other symptoms the participants experienced were loss of sense of taste and smell, difficulty breathing, and sore throat. Upon manifestation of symptoms, immediate action was taken where participants decided to seek medical attention and to get tested immediately to confirm their assumption and receive proper medical treatment. While, few participants tried to drink supplements first and chose to check their situation for hours before seeking medical attention. This is the instinct and perception of people. Often, rather than being in panic, people first do what they can to improve their health. This is unavoidable especially with COVID-19 infection since some of its symptoms are similar to other medical conditions. In addition, it was reported that a survivor suffered from hypertension the moment the swab test result came out positive. One primary reason why it occurred and why she was infected was due to old age. According to Villa et al. (2020) people tend to hide their symptoms in order to avoid social stigma. These

responses also show the experiences of COVID-19 survivors on physical and physiological domains. However, it can be gleaned from the responses that most of the participants have initiated to undergo tests for confirmation rather than hide what they really feel physically. This shows the attitude of the respondents and how they perceive the situation. It is important to immediately act to be treated as early as possible. Having to experience physiological challenges is one of the experiences that can never be forgotten by the participants. Apart from these, it showed that sleeping problems arose when the infected people were in quarantine due to stressors brought by the disease. According to World Health Organization and Rajkumar (2020) as cited in Moradi et al. (2020), the emergence of COVID-19 has brought stress and has imposed serious risks on the lives of patients. This has drastically contributed alongside their physical state in the mental health status of patients similar to the observation during the SARS and MERS epidemics (Bo et al. 2020; Park et al. 2020; Shin et al. 2019).

The study revealed various physiological and psychosocial emotions such as the disgust and distant reaction of the people around the COVID-19 patients in addition to their loneliness and distress during their isolation. Being isolated from everyone within the period of two to three weeks could be tough for the patients, especially that they have an illness wherein they will be needing constant encouragement from their loved ones. According to the study of Galea et al. (2004), psychological distress can result from a quarantine, it can be in the forms of PTSD and depressive symptoms. That may be why most of the participants' experience psychosocial disturbance during their isolation and which also became one of their distinctive

experiences. Bhattacharya et al. (2020) stated that COVID-19 has psychosocial effects on the survivors which include an emotional state where they felt imprisoned. Another similar study made by Sun et al. (2021) mentioned that people who tested positive from the infection experienced stressors, mind and body reaction, and fear related behavior. The infection has caused a huge toll on patients' minds and lives during the disease crisis. Psychological distress is one of the major challenges faced by these people which affects their mental and emotional stability. In the study of Moradi et al. (2020), he expounded psychological disturbances patients experience aside from physical complications and draining symptoms caused by the disease which then led to patients feeling like living in limbo. The participants in this study and their families had several reactions when they learned that they had tested positive to COVID-19 and these substantially impacted their psychosocial, physical, and physiological parameters. Most patients were shocked, worried, and scared during that time which was like the feelings of their families. The statements of the participants proved the study of Knestrick et al. (2021) that the psychological experiences of COVID-19 survivors frequently resulted in anger, shame or embarrassment, and anxiety. Hence, most of the participants experienced worries and heavy feelings after learning that they tested positive for COVID 19. According to the narrative lived experiences of the three people who survived Coronavirus disease, their mental health during those times is worse as they experienced guilt of infecting others, blamed oneself for having the disease, and felt ashamed for being careless (Sahoo et al., 2020). The distress experienced by the patients are caused by not only the disease itself, but also because of the duties

and responsibilities that could be affected due to the situation they are in. Some participants were concerned about their schooling and work and how they are going to continue and go through it, with them under quarantine and treatment. Work not only has caused trouble to the minds of patients but also inconvenience to their financial stability. Due to medical treatment and other bills necessary for recovery, patients and their families have suffered financial crises. Additional and huge expenses brought by the infection have forced affected families to budget their salary to cover all necessities. Moreover, being the only provider for the family and coming out as positive to COVID-19 added to their burden. These circumstances as well contributed to psychosocial difficulties showing the relation between work and financial stability. However, the study had shown that after acquiring the infection and surviving from it, the participants changed their perspective towards the disease. Self adjustments are a crucial way for patients with the disease as long as the family and friends support them. Acceptance of the disease is not easy to patients; it is a process that will take a lot of encouragement. Providing support and guidance all along their journey would promote the physical and mental recovery of COVID-19 patients (Sun et al., 2021). The Journey Towards Recovery The state of patients during isolation is an important factor in which the progress can be tracked as well as their perception towards the disease and health betterment. The findings of this study evidently showed the immediate course of action of patients to improve their health and to prevent themselves from spreading the virus to their families and their vicinity. Various statements by informants highlight the significance of acceptance towards this kind of circumstances, propound that the major

intervention during COVID-19 outbreak had a different positive and negative effects and other practical implications (Bhatt et al., 2020). During the early stage, patients were filled with negativity (Sun et al., 2021), therefore, it is a natural response from COVID-19 patients to be terrified by the virus because it is novel. The majority of people become credulous with the threat caused by various false information as a result of erroneous facts concerning COVID-19 worsen the bigger picture. According to the study of Olufadewa et al. (2020), patients might experience mental health problems during their recovery such as anxiety, panic, fear, and risk perception of death. This is common to COVID-19 survivors that may be due to uncertainty of the disease. However, in contrast to this, some participants also showed a positive outlook and eagerness to recover, which also led and grew their willingness to help themselves. Polizzi et al. (2020) stated that the lockdown and social separation have become the reason that acceptance became a challenge for everyone that it takes a longer time for it to happen. However, this would enable a person to live without any distress. In a similar study, Sun et al. (2021), emphasized that a gradual change in the emotions and thoughts towards COVID-19 have occurred in individuals who have been infected with it wherein their feelings are influenced by and correspond to the stage of the disease. During the early stage, patients were filled with negativity but made difference through acceptance of positive emotions. It can be gleaned how some of the participants were in a state of shock at first but eventually learned to accept the situation. For a person who is ill or suffering from a disease, it could be difficult to grasp the circumstance given the subsequent consequences considering how it could

affect not only their health but their lives in general as well as their families'. One respondent expressed her worry during that time because she is living with her sibling who is of young age and at risk for COVID 19. The physical and mental recovery of COVID-19 patients may be encouraged with proper guidance on their psychological growth (Sun et al., 2021). Contextualizing what has happened together with possible interventions and solutions, a person, may it be a patient, survivor, or just an ordinary one would be free and put their mind at ease (Polizzi et al., 2020). Learning first what the situation is about and thorough exploration of capabilities and alternatives to solve the problem is a great step towards betterment. The study revealed the interventions that were made for health betterment and to avert the spread of infection and that adequate knowledge is an important constituent to create and achieve an environment where each individual can live on their own and freely without trouble of being misjudged by others just because of their condition, this also made them realized that this virus is real and how it can impact one's lives. The study also extracted how the respondents acted towards the infection revealing what initiatives were made during quarantine to improve their well-being. Several respondents said that during their isolation, aside from creating a great environment with the help of their families, in order to uplift themselves and progress towards recovery, they committed themselves to physical activities that would benefit them in alleviating their condition. Moreover, with the consistent help from their families and eagerness of the patients to become well, it showed that constant nourishment and regular intake of vitamins contributed to recovery. The coronavirus disease pushes the patients to grow as individuals with proper

understanding, assistance and awareness brought and supported by people including their families, friends, and medical professionals that gave them a better view of their situation and strength to fight off the disease while in the hospital or in quarantine (Samrah et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021). Family, friends, and colleagues were significant figures that helped and strengthened out the patients physically, emotionally, and mentally throughout their isolation. During the interview, COVID-19 survivors shared how their families supported them in many ways while they were in quarantine. One of these was ensuring that they have nutritious food, enough necessities, and that they are well taken care of. Moreover, discrimination was not felt among their closest loved ones. In fact, they are the ones who gave encouragement for them to feel better for their fast recovery. COVID-19 survivors felt relieved after they found out that the people around them understood the situation and were not harmful to their mental health. Families not only brought and cooked foods but also gave groceries and vitamins that would aid them get through isolation. This kind of support helped the patients' bodies to absorb the nutrients coming from it to gradually gain energy and return their physical strength to normal. Some patients have had a hard time eating because of loss of taste, one of the symptoms of COVID-19. However, in determination to get well, they pushed themselves to eat what their families cooked. Furthermore, the study has shown that motivational approach had a great impact on the betterment of individuals suffering from the disease. The families have become the support system and that their words of encouragement have lifted the spirits of these people during tough times. Physical presence is not necessary; it is enough that patients know that the most important people in their lives

stay by their side. In addition, modern technologies have provided a way for constant communication despite the distance of the patient from his loved ones. According to Samrah et al. (2020), the isolation requirement of COVID-19 pandemic has caused distress to patients. Separation from family may cause one to feel loneliness, however, as in the world today, connecting to family from afar is possible through use of messages or calls, preferably video calls, in mobile phones and other advanced technologies. Apart from family support, respondents have shared how praying and their faith in God helped them when they were recovering. The support shown by the families of the COVID-19 survivors is living proof that family is the most important thing we could ever have. It was never an easy journey to recovery but the lessons of the pandemic have brought a positive dimension to the innate Filipino resilience amidst the chaos from macro-experiences. to micro Transformation and Modification as Means to Survive According to Sun et al. (2021) the quarantine resulted in loneliness, anxiety, helplessness, and depression. Individuals who have been infected with COVID-19 show relative learning after the infection. Culture can have a huge effect on psychological changes and on a patient's social assistance. However, self adjustments are a crucial way for patients with the disease as long as the family and friends support them. Surviving from COVID 19 it helps you to become stronger and braver in life and those are the respondents' experiences. This study highlighted the resilience of COVID-19 survivors, wherein most of the participants have shared how they strived to get their life back to normal after surviving the infection. The experiences of the COVID-19 survivors were not just easy. They came from different challenges that tested their capability

to survive in everyday life. Most of the participants have realized the importance of taking care of oneself and to have a healthy lifestyle after the recovery from the disease. Additionally, survivors regained their self-esteem and have become confident in living because of the lesson brought to them by the infection. Survivors appeared to have a bigger positive outlook which helped them go through the process of healing and circumstances waiting for them after survival. According to Sun et al. (2021), COVID-19 makes people develop their self growth, it helps them to recover from the disease physically and even mentally. The findings have also shown that the infection had made an impact on the perspective of the COVID-19 survivors where it changed after they survived the disease. The experience also opened an opportunity for the survivors to share their knowledge to anyone who is in the similar situation as them. It gave them the chance to give advice to other COVID-19 patients on what to expect, how to properly handle the situation, and what are the possible remedies and treatment that they had to undergo in order to successfully recover from the infection. Despite the circumstance, COVID-19 opened new opportunities and made the survivors tougher to face other challenges that will come into their lives.

## CONCLUSION

The experiences of COVID-19 survivors on psychosocial, physical, and psychosocial domains reflected through their initial reaction, immediate response, and the symptoms they presented during the course of infection. By which, awareness of the disease played a significant role in fighting off the infection, as well as to prevent it from spreading. The COVID-19 infection impacted the life of the

survivors in many ways. It affected their daily lives, labor, and academic responsibilities, which then resulted in distress. Furthermore, it was also revealed that health became their primary concern to fully recover from the infection and prevent themselves and the people around them from acquiring the infection once again. Family played the most significant role in the journey of the patients towards recovery. They realized the importance of taking care of oneself to prevent acquiring the infection. In addition to that, the experiences of COVID 19 survivors paved the way to share their knowledge and experiences with the patients suffering from COVID-19 infection and to help them survive from the infection. Disclosure The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

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