

## What a ski mask and scuba goggles taught this physician during Covid

By Penelope Hsu, MD

Within a week of COVID-19 first hitting New York City and the city shutting down back in March of 2020, a group of my fellow single female physicians and I started a weekly Friday night Zoom happy hour. We instinctively knew that we would need the support to get through what was an incredibly dark and difficult time in NYC. We expressed our fears of not having enough (or, at some points, *any*) PPE, the misery of losing so many patients so quickly, and our helplessness to stem any of it. It was comforting to share these dark emotions with people I knew who truly understood.



This went on for weeks. We would share our stories of how many cases we had seen, how many refrigerator trucks we counted, how many co-workers were not coming in anymore. The solace we found in each other and taking time to unwind was the only social interaction any of us were having, outside of patient care. Knowing we could be the vector of disease, none of us were seeing our family or even venturing outside for a walk in the park. Our lives consisted of the office and our homes, with the weekly respite of our only social connection on our Zoom happy hours.

On roughly the 8th week of this comforting yet depressing routine, my friend showed up to our Zoom with a 'care package' a non-medical friend had sent her. It was a set of ski goggles, a scuba mask (complete with mouthpiece and tubing), a welder's helmet, and what I can only describe as a rudimentary astronaut helmet. The card attached said it was their contribution to the need for PPE in the city. We chuckled slightly at the idea of using such gear and what our patients would say if we actually showed up wearing any of it. This quickly led to a discussion of how having *something* was better than nothing. Which then turned into my friend actually modeling the gear, one at a time. Which amazingly led to...laughter. Genuine, belly aching-laughter. The three of us were barely able to contain ourselves as she went from underwater swimmer to outer space explorer. It was hilarious. And exactly what we needed.

It was the moment that I remembered joy. I remembered what it meant to laugh out loud. To just not be worried, but to feel some of the lightheartedness that so many others were sharing with their social media posts about their sourdough starters and new Pelotons. Could we post about our new 'gear' too? We soon started rattling off other ideas-garden gloves, welder's aprons, those oversized sunglasses they give you after you've had your eyes dilated, those school lunch hair nets. For the first time in months, we all let loose.

That was the moment I 'snapped' back into living. It was as if the light turned back on in my soul. I remembered how to laugh, how to make jokes, how to feel hope and light. From that moment on, I decided to at least step onto my once balcony every day and actually breathe. I would wait till late afternoon on days that I was off and go to a park and sit faaaar away from everyone else in my N95 just

to see the sky and experience some nature, if only for 5 minutes. I started reading novels again and having Zoom meetings with other friends and family.

As a coach, I teach my clients that there is always something to be grateful for, even in the darkest of times. There is always something good happening, if you just look for it. I admit to not feeling that way MANY times during the last 2 years. I know it's hard to find joy when so many people are still dying as we head into year 3 of this pan/endemic. It's hard to smile when the numbers of healthcare workers in the field are plummeting as more and more of us burn out and leave the profession. And attention bias tells us that once our mind is set to look at things in a certain way, it will continue to find further evidence to support that mindset. Essentially the dark gets darker, quickly.

The converse is also true, though. The light can get lighter quickly, when our attention is geared towards that. It sometimes takes someone or something external to us to shift our attention back 'to the light'. Sometimes it's seeing something bright and colorful in nature. I often suggest to clients to take a walk and try to find 5 red things or count the number of white fluffy dogs they see. Or create a soothing playlist to listen to in the car ride to work. Sometimes it's connecting to a friend you haven't talked to in a while. Sometimes it's commiserating with friends over wine and a laptop. And sometimes, it takes some scuba gear and ski goggles to bring you back to the light.

As we enter our third year of living with COVID, my challenge to all my clients and myself is to keep looking for those pockets of joy and cherishing them. That fateful COVID fashion show is forever captured in a series of screenshots on my laptop. When I find myself getting overwhelmed, I will often flip back to my friend with her googly eyes peering out of the scuba gear, and smile.

We can't do much to reverse the effects of COVID on our population or on our healthcare system. But we can develop the resilience to combat the sadness and despair. I challenge you to find the small moments, the little respites, and celebrate them greatly. Collate them into a journal or photo album or collect the mementos to stand as a reminder of all that is good in the world.

And if you can't find anything, let me know. I know where to get some good ski goggles and joy.

## **We Can Help**

[VITAL WorkLife](#) is also here to help bring back YOUR joy. For counseling, coaching and other resources contact us at **877.731.3949**, through the [VITAL WorkLife App](#) or [online](#).