SPS member profile: Art Rousseau, MD

February 2021 member spotlight

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Art Rousseau, MD Oklahoma State Medical Association Oklahoma Psychiatric Physicians Association Psychiatry Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

For those who don’t know me, I am 72-years-old and in relatively good health. I like to consider myself as living a “healthy” lifestyle, and I keep physically active with moderate exercise.

I am in the private practice of psychiatry; I am active in the Oklahoma State Medical Association and the Oklahoma Psychiatric Physicians Association. I am also chairman of the Legislative Committee of the OSMA, which, I will confess, continually tests my cognitive functioning, patience and temperament while the legislature is in session, which, by the way, happened to be during my illness and convalescence.
Q: How and when did you contract COVID-19 over the past year?

A: Although both my wife and I enjoy alone time, we attend multiple activities, which have large crowds of people. This would be from church, a number of sporting events as well as the symphony and Broadway. That isn’t even counting the activities we attend with our three children and seven grandchildren. This includes being a fan and spectator at many of their activities. I think you get the point that we keep ourselves pretty busy in “crowded” social activities.

Of course, the downside of this is we definitely set ourselves up to exposure of all kinds of bugs in these large crowds. Just being with our grandkids, or should I say, seven little Petri dishes of viruses and bacteria is a threat to anyone’s health.

When I try to think back as to when I first began to notice any viral or respiratory symptoms, I have to admit, I have great difficulties in identifying exactly when my symptoms began. Of course, that is a part of the problem. The incubation period of COVID-19 appears to be so varied, it is hard to say when I was exposed. In talking to my doctors, we theorized that the initial exposure could have occurred as early as mid-February of last year. At that time we had taken a trip with our son and his family to the NASA Space Center in Houston. There was obviously a large crowd assembled there. But I can only recall developing a slight cough going back as far as the first of March but no other symptoms.

Q: How has an infectious disease outbreak affected you—both physically and emotionally—and what would you suggest to help other families to cope?

A: The five weeks of isolation was somewhat of a blur. I would check my temperature and O2 sats frequently and I would add, I maintained a fever for 21 days. My cough was significant and persistent. I experienced a significant lack of energy and spent a lot of time on the couch. To pass the time we watched the news, which was quite depressing. We quickly learned to minimize that.

So, what else did we do? Well along with movies and nature shows, we made it through all eight seasons of “Game of Thrones” and God help us, “Tiger King.” The weeks were only divided by our attending Church online, otherwise, it was difficult to tell one day from the next.

Our kids would send frequent text messages with pictures of how and what they were doing. We were also able to Facetime and Zoom with them frequently. There is no question that the internet and social media can definitely be identified as “protective factors” in our recovery. Although we would have no contact, our kids would drop by to bring us a little gift or some groceries but we would have no physical contact.

So many things that we did in our world were now restricted. It should not be surprising that we felt loss. Much of what is often defined as our identity was being taken away. Not just because of the physical symptoms but secondary to the very nature of the social isolation that we were experiencing.
through the sheltering-in-place.

Q: How have you managed to stay positive during COVID-19 and return back to practice?
Art Rousseau, MD, working from home.

A: One of my saving graces was finding out that the CARES Act loosened the HIPAA restrictions on telemedicine. I was able to set up an “office space” in one of my son’s old bedrooms. Our office was closed but our office assistant was coming into the office alone and screening calls for us. She began to set up a schedule for me. I don’t think telemedicine will replace face-to-face psychiatric treatment but it is definitely better than nothing not only for my patients but for me.

On Monday, March 30, I saw my first patient remotely. I commented to my wife not to laugh at me that I was putting on a tie but I wanted to try to get things back to normal, not only for me but for my patients. I also had a picture taken of my office and I used it as a virtual background on Zoom. Many of my patients commented how much they appreciated me doing this. So at least a part of my identity was reinstated.

Although I was told I could consider myself “recovered” after three days of being without a fever, my cough continued to persist so we agreed that we would wait two more weeks before we would feel comfortable being around family members. My fever broke on April 2. When April 15 came, I was ready to at least get out of the house, so my wife and I went to the office just to see if it was still there and to prepare the office for our new associate who was to join us on May 1. The next day, April 16, the Oklahoma Blood Institute called and asked if I would come in for another COVID-19 test, pointing out, if it was negative, I would be able to give convalescent plasma. I was told that they would have the results back in 24 hours. The next day they called me and said I was negative and asked if I would come in that evening to give plasma. I agreed to come in and was told that I would provide enough plasma to treat three COVID-19 patients. Being able to help others was quite the emotional boost for me.

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