

How am I?



A homeless man staggers drunkenly and begins to wheeze as he hunches over one of the worn-down seats on the Metro. Everyone within 10 feet quickly turns away and frantically searches for any open space without a coughing man. Nobody wears a mask, yet some still cover their mouths with their shirts or scarves. I reach for my pocket-sized hand sanitizer, pump out a good amount and slather it all over my hands. It's early February of 2020 and I am studying abroad in Paris.

I remember when my best friend Libby and I first heard about COVID-19. At the time, it was only referred to as the coronavirus or the "coroni", according to my fellow American's who were also in my abroad program. Coronavirus was a myth to us. We heard about it beginning to spread in Rome and dismissed the warnings as we selfishly booked a trip to Berlin. Ignorance *is* bliss. Even though I am hyper self-aware, I found liberation in the act of letting go and not taking this possible situation too seriously. This was a big deal for me since I am a person with anxiety and the ability to overthink every scenario. I had to take full advantage of this experience. After all, this was my semester abroad and I only had one!

The entire semester was planned out and it was a dream come true. I originally had zero interest in studying abroad my junior year because of health complications I did not think would

get resolved in time. At the end of summer 2018, I fell incredibly ill. When I saw my doctors to explain my constant throwing up and episodes running to the bathroom, they told me that my anxiety was making me physically sick. After five months of constant, extreme nausea, pain, exhaustion, trips to the bathroom and nights in the hospital, they finally *correctly* diagnosed me with Clostridium Difficile. This was unfortunately five months too late, and not to mention, extremely rare for someone my age to have. The worst part was that I continued to take all of my classes that semester and nobody knew how sick I was. Nor did they know the amount of effort it took me to even get out of bed those days.

C. diff is a bacterium most commonly found in babies and the elderly due to them living in environments such as hospitals or long-term care facilities where it can easily spread. It just so happened that I contracted it from taking too many antibiotics the months prior to the summer of 2018. The inside of my stomach was so messed up and raw at that point that the first round of harsh antibiotics didn't work and made it come back even worse. After going on a different antibiotic, I began to slowly feel better and like myself again. It's funny that I had to treat my illness with antibiotics which was exactly the thing that gave me C. diff in the first place. Now, I can never take antibiotics again in my life.

As you can imagine, aside from being on the brink of death, literally, my anxiety was significantly enhanced because I had been told for months that I wasn't sick – just anxious! This was its own battle in itself, and I had to relearn how to read my body and fully trust myself when I know something isn't right. That was tough after having professionals and my own family tell me that it was all in my head, but I couldn't blame them because they didn't know. Thankfully, I restored my good health and regained the motivation to head to Europe after 18 months of recovery; so now you can understand my hesitation to be so far away from my family and

doctors. Not having the ability to take antibiotics puts me and my health at higher risk (especially in another country), but I was finally healthy. It's just my luck to have everything turn on its head the one time I have this incredible opportunity.

Anxiety is one hell of a disorder. I fear the unknown. Everything I do is intentional and meticulously thought out. Everything is a plan. Studying abroad in France was a plan. But coronavirus wasn't supposed to be part of that plan. I am a person who needs to have control at all times. If I don't have it, the gears in my head begin working overtime; frantically processing jumbled thoughts that I can't seem to organize, which is ironic because I also have OCD. I lost that complete control as soon as the pandemic began to gain steam and that terrified me.

Losing control feels like running on a hamster wheel that never stops. You start running, but soon enough your legs begin to feel like lead and your chest tightens up; beads of sweat accumulate on the back of your neck, dripping down onto the wheel making its surface slippery. You wheeze from exhaustion and gasp for a breath of air, but the wheel only continues to spin faster. It seems like you should be able to simply hop off, but it's not that simple.

Remember you have to keep going. Your feet slip on your sweat gathered at the bottom of the wheel. You know you need to get off but fail in every attempt to jump to the inert ground. The uncontrollable spinning churns your stomach and you can feel your body breaking down, creating an endless cycle of negative thoughts. There is nothing you can do. You don't have the ability to control the wheel, and it's almost impossible to accept that realization.

It's late February, early March. Suddenly, the Metro has limited hours. Hand sanitizer is sold out in just about every pharmacy or purchased at a ridiculous price of \$60 a dispenser.

Masks have been out of stock for at least a week already. There is still limited news and knowledge about it all back in the United States. When our abroad program sent out the email officially cancelling our program mid-March, it was devastating but not surprising.

Libby and I did everything we could to stay and I truly mean that. We were convinced this would pass and we'd be able to continue our classes remotely in Paris. After all, if it was getting so bad, why would it be beneficial to travel and how could being in the U.S. protect me any better from COVID-19 than France? Completely dismissing my mother and father's valid reasons to worry, I was confident I would stay. It was only when my friend Somer's parents bought her ticket home that I realized the severity of this virus.

Trump's poorly worded statement about closing the border was the ultimate factor that forced me home in the end. Unwilling to agonize and wait any longer, my parents said it was time for me to pack my things before the mandatory stay-at-home order was implemented in Paris. My block of control had completely chipped away at that point. I was in denial, but one expensive first-class flight later (because that's all that was available), and I am back in the states.

My family embraces me, but only after making me put on a hazmat suit, thick gloves, and a medical grade mask. A required 2-week quarantine at home was a harsh adjustment after having all of the freedom in the world and being completely on my own. It's quite easy to turn to anger or frustration when things don't go your way, and that's exactly what I did. I took my anger out on my parents and younger siblings because I didn't know what else to do with it. Once again, I had no control over the situation, and it drove me mad. The repressed anger I felt build in Paris bubbled to the surface and reared its ugly head.

In a way, I needed closure because otherwise the trip wouldn't feel complete. It didn't come full circle and I'm one to assign special meaning to practically everything in my life. I was unable to say goodbye to my incredible Parisian friends. I was unable to go on my trip to Amsterdam. I was unable to enjoy one last buttery, flaky croissant and a cup of coffee while watching the bustling city I had just started to call home pass by. I was unable to obtain "closure" with France. And perhaps it was much needed. I changed a lot as a person during my time there, but separation from Europe as well as my newfound friends forced me to let go and move on. I loosened my tight grip on the control and felt embodied when I began to balance my need for freedom with life's repetitive mundanity. I'm certain that life means something. Because of this, I tend to put a lot of faith in my ideals which then gives me the power to speak with truth and clarity.

So, how am I? I'm adjusting. It's what I do. It's part of who I am. I'm adjusting myself in order to survive in a world with no guarantees. Adjusting my thoughts, adjusting my goals, and adjusting my attitude especially because that is all I can do. Who I am in this world changes depending on the objective and circumstance. It's my job to figure out who I need to be and how to shift. I so badly want that control back in my hands. The immense pressure to predict the future and outline my entire life weighs on me heavily and reiterates the concept of control in my mind. I'm still running and slipping on my own hamster wheel, but the spinning has started to slow. I've made significant progress, but I also have a long road ahead of me. As my friends in Paris would say, "C'est la vie".