

‘How many people did I get sick?’ Testing positive for COVID-19 can bring feelings of guilt and shame

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She’d thought through the travel for the holiday carefully. Working remotely, limiting activities to school-related outings and curbing any other possibility for exposure.

And still, the second day of the trip, Christine Hutchinson’s nose felt sniffily.

She thought it was related to travel, or simply being a Chicagoan: “Our noses run.”

But when other people within the friend group her family had traveled with internationally also began feeling ill, she took a test. It came back positive for COVID-19.

Now, quarantining in another country, the Chicago mom of two is wrestling with guilt over things ranging from ruining her daughters’ trip to guilt about who else she might have infected.

“I’m like, ‘How many people did I get sick?’” she said. “Did I get somebody else sick at the airport?”

Within the recent holiday season, many people made difficult decisions surrounding holiday travel or family gatherings. And the [contagious omicron variant added extra complications](#) just as people made impossible-seeming calculations for the second year in a row.

Many who felt they understood risk and safety calculations found those upended as omicron swept in.

Thus, many are now in situations where they must tell people they recently saw that they've since tested positive for COVID-19.

And many might have their own negative connotations about what it means to test positive – assumed reckless decisions that left someone exposed, for example.

“When COVID first started, there was a lot of judgment about those who were getting sick,” said Sheehan Fisher, a psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. Now, he said, as vaccinated people who followed regulations test positive or feel sick, “They fear that others assume that they are not following the regulations.”

But disclosing a possible exposure is vital. And if people feel shamed, they might be less likely to disclose. So people on both sides of these conversations should strive to handle them well.

If you are telling people about a positive result, said David Rakofsky, a clinical psychologist and president of Wellington Counseling Group, hopefully they respond with a version of, “I hope you feel OK, and I will get tested and take precautions from here.”

But if they instead summon anger or disappointment, remember this is borne out of years of frustration and annoyance.

“They’re trying to make sense of an uncontrollable universe, and this is leaving them really stirred up,” he said.

People who test positive should carry compassion and empathy for themselves, Rakofsky said.

“You want to take a step back and review your thinking as to the choices you made,” he said. “We have to remember that you didn’t necessarily have the same facts that we have today. And so you need to let that guide you toward compassion, that you didn’t do something reckless. You made a calculation based on the facts.”

Also, he added, people made decisions around the holiday for reasons worth considering: seeing family, filling emotional tanks.

“Remind yourself of the emotional and relational needs that you were responding to,” he said. “There are grandparents your kids haven’t seen.” Information around COVID-19 continues to evolve. Activities that might have seemed safe in early December might look different a month later. And Fisher said that’s not something someone should beat themselves up about.

“They second guess their previous decision as if they had their future knowledge readily available to them when they made the decision, which isn’t fair to them,” Fisher said.

It’s tempting, as humans, to believe that good arrives with us making every right decision. Instead, this is a good time for everyone to realize that if someone never got COVID-19, it’s not necessarily because they miraculously made every decision correctly, Fisher said. “All of us have made gray decisions.”

He added, “We become a little self-righteous in our evaluations of ourselves and decision-making in comparison to others.” That can lead to harsher judgment for those that test positive.

Should you test positive, remember guilt is not a sign you have done something wrong. “Emotions and thoughts sometimes lie to us,” Fisher said. “Just because we might feel guilty does not mean you did something you are guilty of, but we equate them to be one and the same.”

Hutchinson keeps thinking back to one quick moment — picking up her daughter after a sports activity. She was in a lobby waiting mere minutes to collect her daughter but recalls feeling instantly uncomfortable as other parents and students weren’t masked.

Now, amid omicron, she keeps mentally returning to that moment. She’d even half-jokingly told her daughter not to inhale as they walked out. Of course, it’s impossible to pin down where she became infected. Regardless, it’s made her feel like patient zero. And it’s added mental anguish to the physical toll.

“I got my kids sick, I got my friends sick, I ruined the vacation,” she said. So far, she and others who tested positive face mild cases, with a variety of cold-like symptoms.

And she and her friends are still friends. They had to find a new place to quarantine, to fulfill the country's 10-day quarantine requirement before flying home and find new ways to fill the time after the long-planned vacation fell apart.

Still, she knows she is lucky to not be hospitalized or have further fallout. She hopes sharing her story can help others be even more careful. Her family is vaccinated with no comprising health issues, but she keeps thinking about how many people are living with people more compromised.

"It's not just about yourself, it's everyone around you," she said. "You don't know what somebody's going home to."

Fisher said one byproduct of this strange season might be increased empathy.

"Because we know so many people who have gotten it, and people we respect and love, it might sort of shake our view of what it means to have a diagnosis," he said.