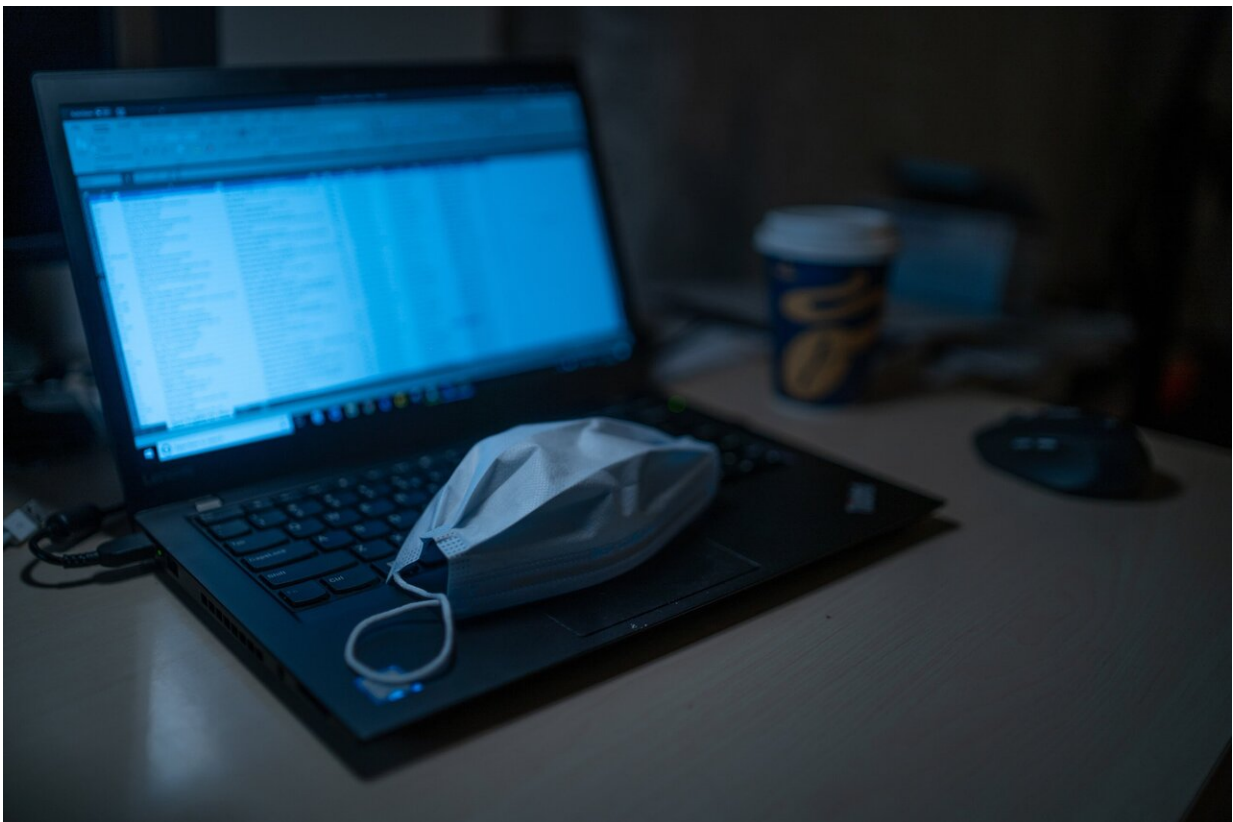


They contracted COVID more than a year ago. How these 4 people are fighting lasting effects

March 7 2022, by Mary Norkol



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Hardee spent nearly six months hospitalized with COVID-19.

He suffered two strokes, COVID-induced pneumonia, a medically induced coma and several months wiped from his memory.

More than a year after his initial infection, he's still not back to the person he was before the coronavirus.

That's the case for many so-called COVID-19 long-haulers in Horry County, South Carolina, and across the country.

Hardee's lung capacity is still only at 38%.

Michelle Ford can't taste or smell her food.

Robert Bellamy was diagnosed with diabetes.

Dr. Lisa Centilli felt depressed, frustrated and alone.

They attribute it all to the coronavirus.

Lingering symptoms of COVID-19 can last long after the virus initially attacks the body.

In Horry County, residents who caught COVID more than a year are still battling the lasting physical, emotional and mental effects.

'I can barely stay awake'

Since it first arrived in South Carolina in March 2020, the coronavirus has stumped doctors, overwhelmed hospitals and ravaged the bodies of its victims.

Some of those patients still don't feel normal in their own skin.

While common long-lasting symptoms of COVID-19 include fatigue, coughing and loss of taste and smell, recovering from the virus looks different for everyone, according to Conway Medical Center Chief Medical Officer Paul Richardson.

Hardee spent months on a ventilator, and it took time to walk again.

Even now, his body is riddled with scar tissue. And he's preparing for a [lung transplant](#) in the coming years as he struggles with tasks he used to do with ease.

"When that sets in, it hurts," Hardee said.

Some who faced less extreme bouts of the illness haven't been able to shake the symptoms.

Ford, a Longs mother of three who tested positive in May 2020 and is not vaccinated, says her life now bears no resemblance to her life pre-COVID.

"I will talk for like, maybe two or three minutes at a time, because I literally would run out of breath," she said in January, more than 18 months after she first contracted the virus. "Even right now, I can barely stay awake."

Perhaps one of the most jarring shifts attributed to the virus was Ford's loss of taste and smell. It still hasn't fully returned.

"You're trying to remember what things smell like, but you can't remember," she said. "So it's like, I think I might smell something. And there's nothing."

Bellamy and his wife, Conway mayor Barbara Blain-Bellamy, both

tested positive in June 2020 as Horry County became a hotspot for coronavirus infections.

He was able to kick most symptoms relatively quickly, but other health issues continued to crop up.

After being prediabetic, Bellamy was diagnosed with diabetes following his COVID infection. His doctor told him he might have avoided that diagnosis if it wasn't for COVID.

He also struggled with knee pain he hadn't felt since right after his knee replacement years ago.

"When the COVID came down, I started having knee problems, really hurting every day and night," Bellamy said, who is vaccinated. "It had completely healed (before COVID)."

Some may never again reach their pre-COVID baseline.

Coming to terms with that has been its own type of hurdle, according to Centilli, a vaccinated family doctor at Tideland Health. She caught the virus in 2020 and dealt with fatigue and dizziness long after the rest of her symptoms faded.

"At first I was like, 'I'll be fine, I'll be fine,'" Centilli said. "And then when I wasn't getting better, I thought, 'Okay, I need to figure out what's going on.'"

'They don't see the nightmares I went through'

In the early stages of the pandemic, the psychological effects of quarantine and extreme uncertainty dominated mental health conversations.

For people who battled the disease, isolation was a given.

For those with long-term COVID, the isolation was worse.

For some, it hasn't stopped.

"My friends and family, they saw how bad it was," Hardee said. "They don't see the nightmares I went through ... the sounds of the hospital at night, constantly, having nightmares that they're trying to fix me."

"And I can't breathe. Then I wake up and I can't breathe."

Before COVID, Hardee prided himself on being active, hosting gatherings for friends and neighbors.

He loved his job in Georgetown with the state Department of Transportation, and you could always find him at the grill.

He still hosts friends and works his grill.

But it's more complicated now.

Before a cookout, he thinks about his friends' vaccination status and worries about the effect smoke from the bonfire might have.

Like other Horry County residents trying to bounce back, Hardee is often left feeling frustrated—frustrated his life isn't the way it once was; frustrated that simple tasks take more brain power and energy; frustrated that people don't seem to understand what the illness is putting him through.

Mounting physical challenges can lead to or worsen depression and anxiety, according to Terry Pettijohn, a professor at Coastal Carolina

University who specializes in social psychology.

"If you've already had depression or anxiety or some of these other issues in the past, this might actually multiply that," he said.

When Ford reflects on her life two years ago, it's nearly unrecognizable.

"My life was so much different," she said. "I had a social life. I had friends. (I was) taking the kids on vacations, we're traveling up north"

COVID has changed that.

"I don't like leaving my house anymore," she said. "And that's not who I used to be."

She's wrestles with serious anxiety that grows from the uncertainty about her health.

As doctors continue to learn about the effects of the evolving virus, they haven't been able to give her a definite answer as to if and when her lasting symptoms will subside.

Like Hardee, the infamous "brain fog" plagues Ford.

"There's days where I can't remember if I ate, took a shower," she said. "There's hours that go by that I don't even realize that have gone by."

Without a solid timeline of recovery, the process can be dark.

"Everyone just kind of said, 'Don't worry, it'll get better,'" Centilli said.

"There was just this time period where I felt very alone ... it takes a toll

on you mentally."

'I want to know when I'm going to have a somewhat normal life again'

The past two years have tested relationships in myriad ways.

In many instances, those who battled the virus have seen those tests exacerbated.

Facing any disease can be isolating, and support is a must for a smooth recovery.

But even with a strong support system, relationships can fray under the pressure.

Ford and her children are still trying to repair what the virus broke.

"It really cut between me and my kids," said Ford, a single mother. "It took a big toll on them ... I couldn't do anything about it."

With the coronavirus, formerly private health decisions became common conversation.

At times, it has also been the impetus for ending relationships.

Hardee, who says he doesn't consider vaccines to be "political," has gotten both of his shots.

But he's also seen friendships dissolve over the polarizing issue.

He said people unwilling to get the vaccine should "go talk to (my

daughter) and ask how she felt about her daddy" being in the hospital for so long.

That talk, he said, will likely "change your mind to make you go to do it. Because of your family," Hardee said.

Horry County COVID survivors approach the future with a complicated combination of hope and fear: Hopeful their recovery continues, but they fearful of the possibility they'll never be the same person again.

"I want to know when I'm going to have a somewhat normal life again," Ford said. "Or if I'm going to."

There's another worry—the possibility of catching the virus a second time.

"I think about it quite a bit," Bellamy said. "I just hope I don't get it again I don't let it change my train of thought. I do what I need to do to try to continue."

Those who suspect they have long-lasting COVID symptoms should speak to their primary care doctor and find a support group to bond with others facing similar challenges, according to Richardson and Dr. Gerald Harmon, vice president of medical affairs at Tideland Health.

Centilli found such a group helpful.

"I started to start to feel not so alone," she said. "In my struggle, I started to feel validated and what I was feeling, I started to feel more a sense of, 'Okay, other people are going through this.'"

"I'm not crazy, I can get over this."

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