

Shared from the 6/18/2023 Houston Chronicle eEdition

LONG YEARS OF BEING SICK AND TIRED

Christine Coglaiti was an ER nurse who spent her life on her feet. Then she got COVID — and never got better.

By Sarah Smith STAFF WRITER



Photos by Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer

Christine Coglaiti watches a lecture on COVID in her bed in Katy last month. She has been living with long COVID since 2020.

You're exhausted when you open your eyes in the bedroom you had painted the color of a Veuve Clicquot champagne label. The bright marigold walls bring you ...

What's the word? They bring you — joy.

The walls bring you joy, that's the word, and you need to find joy in something.



The former ER nurse who could make instant life-or-death decisions now suffers brain fog.

Maybe you slept for 13 hours last night. Maybe you haven't slept at all. Or maybe it's the morning after your insomnia culminated in a 4 a.m. panic attack so severe that your mother thought you couldn't breathe when she raced downstairs and grabbed a Sunny D to spike your blood sugar, which had dropped to dangerous levels. You cried, I can't take this anymore, I can't take this anymore.

You have been taking it for two and a half years.



You may still be

Photos by Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer

Christine Coglaiti spends time with her 11-year-old son, Lachlan, after school last month in Katy. For a while, she tried to keep her illness from him.

asleep in the champagne room when your 11-year-old son goes to school in a green sweatshirt that matches his green kickball. Your mother, who lives with you because you can't do life on your own, will drive him. Your son is used to this. You hate that your son is ...

Pause. Exhale.

... is used to this.



Dr. Joseph Varone hugs Christine during an office visit in January. He knew the old Christine.

All you want is to be well enough to take him to a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert at Minute Maid Park on May 25. (His first, if you don't count the Incubus concert he went to in the womb, which he does.) Even if someone has to roll your corpse into the arena and arrange it on a seat, you will be there.

(Your sense of humor keeps you going. Your sense of humor is not for everyone.)

You weren't always like this. Before you got COVID in the fall of 2020, you were a different Christine Coglaiti. That Christine was an ER nurse who never got tired and could make life-or-death decisions in an instant. That Christine had no trouble managing her Type 1 diabetes. That Christine had a photographic memory.

This Christine is one of as many as 23 million people in the U.S. with long COVID.

People who, like you, went to doctor after doctor before finding one who said, Yes, I believe you. People whose symptoms range from inflammation to exhaustion to nausea to never-ending migraines to ... brain fog.

You do not like this Christine, who speaks in starts and stops, pausing to reach for words she can't quite grasp even though the old Christine always got picked to read aloud at school and never stumbled, that was back in Catholic school, back in Louisiana when —

You are rambling. What were you supposed to be saying?

The new voice. The voice isn't ... it just isn't yours.

You spend the morning in the champagne room, surrounded by Tibetan prayer flags and photos of your son and bright plastic dragonflies and a curlicue Winston Churchill quote: "I could not live without champagne. In victory I deserve it. In defeat I need it." You lean back beside a pillow of a llama blowing a pink bubble and look out the window into your fenced backyard. You get lost in ... you lose track of ... your thoughts.

Because today is a day you'll venture out into the world, you push aside the flowered comforter and shower in a room painted the same pink as OPI's Bubble Bath nail polish, two black Cs interlocked in the Chanel logo. You pull on your "LLAMA STAY 6 FEET AWAY" T-shirt and stretchy pants. Most of your clothes are new, because this Christine is 50 pounds heavier than the old Christine. If you look at photos of yourself from just four years ago —

Focus.

Two years ago, you collapsed and nearly died in these rooms. Because you relived it every time you went back in, you slept on the living room couch. A contractor on hire to redo your mother's room, a man who knew the old Christine, said you needed a place to heal. The couch didn't cut it. So you created your sanctuary: The champagne room, the Bubble-Bath-pink Chanel room and a nearby bathroom painted robin's-egg Tiffany blue, Christine & Co. stenciled on the walls.

You drive with your mother to the nearby ketamine clinic, where you go to ease your physical pain and emotional depression. You check a box on an intake form that says: "I feel sad more than half the time." In a private room with a reclining chair, a technician hooks up the IV. You ease in your earbuds and put on your ketamine playlist.

Adele croons. The room darkens.

The pandemic wreaked havoc on your mental health even before you got sick, when you used Coors Light and Grey Goose mixed with V8 Splash to numb the pain of treating patients who came into your care only to die. A few Halloweens ago, you left a message on your friend's phone. You don't even remember dialing. You do remember your friend calling at 8:30 the next morning, demanding you open the door. Open the door, she said, or we'll break in. Your friends didn't leave until you went to the hospital.

Nowadays, you keep positivity journals and self-care handbooks. But you also keep Ziploc bags of wristbands from your hospital admissions and plastic boxes stuffed with dozens of orange prescription bottles. You have lain in your bed and waited for death.

You wake up in the clinic's reclining chair, groggy ... groggy from the drugs. You stretch, turn off your music, sigh, make yourself stand. Some days, standing is easy. Other days, when your left knee and your lumbar spine feel that mix of electric jolts and grinding pain, it's nearly impossible.

Your mother drives you from the ketamine clinic to see another of your many doctors. He says you're doing well, which means today is a day you can get out of bed and walk further than the bathroom. You have trouble trusting the good stretches. Just when it feels like it's all sunshine and rainbows — relative, of course

— your face gets so hot you need ice packs and you vomit so much you can't keep food down and your head hurts too badly to sleep.

The doctors' offices are what's left of your social life. You put on makeup the other day for the first time in years. The foundation that once matched your skin is now several shades too dark.

You are exhausted by the time you make it — breathe — you make it home and crawl back into bed.

It's four o'clock and your son is home from school. Once, you asked him to describe a typical day with you. He gave a non-answer. If he were being honest, he would have said: You sleep 90 percent of the time.

Because the smell of food nauseates you, your mother and son have dinner without you. You can hear their laughter from your bed. You can't quite discern what they're saying. On the evenings your mother isn't around, you make yourself endure the smells while your son eats. You need to give him a sense of normalcy. Even if it's manufactured.

Your son visits before he goes to bed on what you call his "rounds." Sometimes he asks if he can make a few dollars by picking up the floor; sometimes he flops into bed with you and you talk about everything from his school day to your health. He'll scold you if your stories ramble. You're in awe that he's only 11. For a while, you tried to keep your illness from him. He figured it out anyway. You promised to never lie to him again.

Today you are so tired that he only lingers to say goodnight before he thumps upstairs to his bedroom.

You turn off your overhead light. The only illumination in the champagne room comes from the soft sepia glow of the square lamp you keep on your bedside table. You rest your head on a green-and-white zigzag pillow. You put on your music: Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan. You close your eyes.

Maybe tonight, you will fall asleep.

Christine didn't get to take her son to the concert. She was too
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