

How humour helped my wife and me get through ‘vicious’ Covid-19

Times **LIVE**



Kaya FM breakfast show presenter David O’Sullivan describes his and his family’s virus hell and how they survived it

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David O’Sullivan



ONE DAY AT A TIME David and Jacqui O’Sullivan are still suffering the after-effects of Covid-19.
Image: Supplied

Four weeks ago my wife, Jacqui O’Sullivan, and I were diagnosed with Covid-19. Now that we’re so much better I thought I would share our story.

Throughout this experience we were never seriously ill enough to require hospital care. We understood how bad things could be. Three months earlier Jacqui contracted a serious lung infection called pneumonitis, which resulted in her spending two days in ICU and later having to rush to KwaZulu-Natal’s Umhlanga Clinic for emergency treatment while we were taking a recuperative long weekend at the beach. So we were ready for the worst.

Despite my best efforts at sanitising, wearing a mask and social distancing, this insidious virus spotted a chink in the armour. I can’t be certain where and from whom I got Covid-19 and, quite frankly, it doesn’t matter. No-one deliberately tried to infect me.

And then I passed it on to Jacqui. I appease my guilt by saying that the closeness of our relationship would have been questioned had she *not* become ill.

At first the symptoms weren't so bad. Rather like a Jägermeister hangover, the headaches could be walked off with a couple of Nurofen. In fact, I wasn't completely convinced I had Covid-19 because I had none of the well-publicised symptoms. No high temperature (I fluctuated between 36.0 and 36.7 throughout), no body aches, no sweating, no nausea, no shortness of breath. I continued working, broadcasting from home as I had done many times during level 5 lockdown.

Then the virus ramped up. Five days after diagnosis and probably eight days after contracting it, I started feeling more tired than usual. It was a Monday and I had woken up, as usual, at 4.30am for my radio show. Normally I can go the whole day without a nap, but as soon as I came off air I needed a lie-down. The next morning I could barely lift my head off the pillow when the alarm went off. I was determined to get through the show, but as I started the first link after the 6am news I could hear in my headphones that all was not right. My voice was sluggish and I sounded like I had a bad cold. I was in trouble. I lay down on the couch in my study between interviews. When I came off air I was grey and went straight to bed, where I stayed all day.

This was the start of the bad patch for both of us. It lasted four days. This exhaustion was the symptom for which we were ill-prepared. I had interviewed many doctors and Covid-19 sufferers, and the issue of fatigue had passed me by. Possibly because I didn't see it as a problem. Tired? Well then, lie in bed, have a nap, read a book, lie on the couch, watch TV. No big deal.

It's not like that. It's an overwhelming, debilitating fatigue which sucks all the energy out of you. Walking around the house left us exhausted. My resting heart rate was an alarming 110 beats a minute (normally it's between 55 and 60). Our brains barely functioned. We couldn't read or watch TV because it was too much effort. All Jacqui and I could do was sleep.

Thankfully our kids are self-sufficient and left us alone. Mike, being autistic and a teenager, prefers his own company, so he carried on as usual in his own little bubble. Tom couldn't believe his luck as he bounced between iPad, Netflix, PS4 and Xbox without a parent ordering him outside.

But on the fifth day we heard Tom sitting in the lounge having a little weep. Jacqui went to console him and he asked: "Are you and dad going to die?" It was the end of the bad patch and we could be around him more to keep him happy.

Initially I found it difficult to explain exactly what was wrong with me, so I just said I had "a general malaise", which seemed to fit. Jacqui immediately turned this into a gag, borrowing from the Neil Patrick Harris sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*, in which the characters turn the adjectives "general"

and “major” into military ranks, followed by a salute. A general breakdown became “general breakdown!” and a salute. A major problem? “Major problem!” Salute.

So a general malaise became “general malaise!” and salute.

As the fatigue worsened we couldn't be bothered to explain how we were feeling, so we just looked at each other and gave a perfunctory salute. It amused us every time.

On one occasion when we were lying in bed dozing in our pathetic state we caught each other's eyes, recognised the strange nature of our situation and started to laugh. We couldn't stop. We laughed until we were gasping. It was all too bizarre.

Another time we were trudging down the passage in opposite directions. As we met we quietly leaned our foreheads against each other and stayed like that for a few moments before collapsing in laughter at how pathetic we were. It was either that or crying, and the laughter cheered us.

From the start we were anxious that Jacqui's pneumonitis had weakened her lungs, providing no resistance to the virus. We kept reading about people who had “a turn for the worse” after the first week. We were waiting for Jacqui's turn for the worse.

We were also worried that my age (58) could be a factor. I had kept fit throughout 2020 with regular exercise and, on doctor's advice, taken a mini cocktail of supplements to boost my immune system. The stories of people who took a turn for the worse and ended up on a ventilator or died were generally in my age category. The doctor said my level of fitness and the supplements played a part in preventing a stay in hospital.

Fatigue may have been the most debilitating symptom. Anxiety was a close second.

Then I developed a tight chest and a cough. The pharmacy delivered an oximeter, which measured my oxygen saturation levels. Anything below 90 required immediate medical attention. My reading never dropped below 94.

Jacqui upped her Indian takeaway order of chicken korma from mild to medium. She even ordered hot samoosas. You have to understand how bold this is for her. I couldn't tease her about having chicken stew.

One day I started burning up. I was sweating and an elephant was sitting on my chest. I was gasping for air. I took my temperature. 36.5. I checked the oximeter. 94. Everything was normal. And just like that my “fever” was gone, the elephant disappeared and I was breathing normally again. It was all in my head. The thermometer and oximeter kept me sane.

Then came the craziest experience. Shortly after the bad patch Jacqui sprayed a clear liquid on my wrist. "What's that?" she asked. The liquid had no smell so I guessed it was water. She was delighted. "It's Issey Miyake!" she said triumphantly of her long-time favourite perfume. It has a strong fragrance. I can smell its distinctive scent in a crowd. Now, with my nose up close to it, I couldn't smell a thing. Once again we collapsed laughing and promptly walked around the house looking for pungent things to smell. Yankee Candle? Nope? Deodorant? Nothing.

The loss of the sense of smell had a major benefit (Major benefit! Salute). Just before falling ill we had bought a Staffordshire bull terrier puppy. Tom named him Buster. As Buster was being house trained he would leave little poops around the house. The boys would fall around gasping at the smell. We rolled our eyes at our overly dramatic kids and cleaned up the mess without any problem. Now suddenly we understood. We couldn't smell anything. Cleaning up poop was easy. Only when our sense of smell returned did we realise that Buster is a very stinky little dog.

Our sense of taste also waned, though didn't completely disappear. Instead, we got an unpleasant metallic taste in our mouths. Jacqui upped her Indian takeaway order of chicken korma from mild to medium. She even ordered hot samosas. You have to understand how bold this is for her. I couldn't tease her about having chicken stew.

I'm a firm believer that when you are sick you should eat as much Paul's Ice Cream as you can. Now I couldn't be bothered as I could barely taste it. It was that serious.

I seldom get ill and I'm used to a rapid recovery from a 48-hour bug, so it was deeply troubling when, day after day, I woke up feeling no better than the day before. Then, at what appeared to be glacial speed, we started feeling better. Twelve days after diagnosis I was well enough to go back on air, though my chest was still tight.

So here we are four weeks later and the recovery rate has speeded up as we get our lives back on track. The timing is perfect as we're on leave. We go the entire day without sleeping, our senses of taste and smell are back, we can watch TV and read books again. Life is back to normal.

But this remorseless virus refuses to admit defeat. Every now and then we suddenly feel very tired or our chests tighten up. It lasts half a day and then it's gone, only to reappear a few days later.

Our biggest problem is having what we call Samuel L Jackson moments. We find our short-term memories are not what they should be. I was flicking through Netflix and came across the mockumentary *Death to 2020* featuring the actor. I was telling Jacqui about it, but suddenly I couldn't remember Jackson's name. It became a bad version of 30 Seconds as I tried to describe the

guy in the opening scene of Quentin Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction*, when John Travolta talks about Big Macs. Except I couldn't remember Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*, Travolta or Big Macs. So I ended up saying "the actor with an initial in his name who talks about burgers". It was enough for Jacqui to get it, but now every brain freeze is a Samuel L Jackson moment.

While I was writing this Jacqui sent me a message saying she had got her doctor's appointment wrong. I replied with a photo of Samuel L Jackson.

Buster was a great distraction at the time. The breeder was passionate about her dogs and sad to see him go. She was at work the day we fetched him, but her mother asked for photos of Buster settling in. Jacqui bombarded her with pictures and videos of Tom spoiling his beloved pet. The breeder would always respond immediately with thanks and appropriate emojis.

On Christmas Eve Jacqui sent her another adorable photo. But this time the breeder didn't immediately reply. Nor did she reply on Christmas Day or Boxing Day. Then we got the phone call to tell us why she wasn't responding. She had died. She had contracted Covid-19. On Christmas Eve she was very weak. She asked her mother to help her to the bathroom. There she collapsed and died. She was 32 years old.

During the bad patch, I stopped looking at social media because I kept seeing Covid-19 horror stories. I was anxious enough. The brainless posts about the virus being a hoax, about it being no worse than normal flu made me furious, as did allegations that the government had an "agenda", without a hint of evidence.

Covid-19 for Jacqui and I was truly horrible, but ultimately manageable as we treated it with a mixture of humour and over-the-counter medication to get us through the bad days. And we never needed hospitalisation. The virus for Buster's breeder was deadly.

So stay safe and ensure those around you are safe. You really don't want this virus. It's vicious.

[None None](#) • [6 days ago](#)

Thanks for your detailed tell-it-like it is experience of Covid-19. Between you and Tanya Farber it's enough to scare us all into ultra-cautious behaviour. Frightening but somehow you two managed to get through it. The absolute exhaustion sounds dreadful and frightening.

[Thea Jackson](#) • [6 days ago](#)

KZN? Surely the sub editor meant to say Kaya FM?

