In March 2020, we shut down our Ph.D. experiments and prepared for an indefinite period of working from home. As we threw away our cell cultures and wound down our animal colonies, we imagined the manuscripts we would finally draft, the papers we would read, and the bioinformatics skills we would learn. However, our plans went astray a few days later when we received an email from our program director with a subject line that read: “Interested in an ‘at home’ public health project to help fight COVID-19?” The email set us down a path we never imagined—one that taught us how the soft skills we’ve learned in graduate school can serve us in the real world. We also learned the hard way that in order to take care of others, we must first take care of ourselves.

Our program director asked us to lead a contact tracing team, charged with tracking down people who’d tested positive for COVID-19 in our city and anyone they may have come in contact with. At first we hesitated, unsure we were qualified. We were both pursuing certificates in public health alongside our microbiology doctorate degrees, but we didn’t have any real-world experience in public health or epidemiology. We were comfortable in a tissue culture hood; what did we know about contact tracing?

We signed up anyway, itching to do something, anything, to help in a time of crisis. Knowing we would need an army of people to serve as contact tracers, we drafted a volunteer application form and emailed it to everyone at our university working in public health, social work, and medicine. Over the next 5 days, we screened and interviewed more than 100 candidates, ultimately taking on 60 volunteers.

Then we built our operation from scratch. We dug into the literature about contact tracing to identify best practices, reached out to contact tracing teams across the nation for guidance, and prepared instructional presentations for the volunteers. Skills we’d gained through our Ph.D. training proved surprisingly useful, such as the ability to research and digest large amounts of information and communicate it to others. Contact tracing was nothing like our Ph.D. projects, but in some ways, we felt prepared to take it on.

Within 3 weeks, our team started to make phone calls to people who may have come in contact with an infected individual and our roles shifted toward providing guidance and support. Every day, new scenarios arose that we hadn’t anticipated, keeping us on our toes.

Our most emotionally challenging day came on the same April day the United States surpassed 1 million confirmed COVID-19 cases. One of our volunteers called a contact, only to learn they had already passed away from the virus. It was a dark reminder of what we were up against and the importance of moving quickly.

The sense of urgency left little time for anything else. We ate meals quickly so we could keep up with the onslaught of video calls. We gave up rejuvenating activities, such as yoga classes and relaxing baths. Our sleep suffered and our mental health plummeted. As weeks turned into months, it became increasingly difficult to think clearly, and we started to make mistakes. One of us even had a panic attack during a meeting.

Eventually, we realized we’d forgotten about our own well-being; we needed to keep ourselves emotionally and physically healthy to help others. So we started to reclaim our weekends, taking turns being on call so the other person could unplug. We were still stressed at times, but as our well-being improved, we found it easier to focus on the critical work we were doing.

After 4 months, our labs began to reopen and we needed to resume our bench science, so we handed our duties over to others. We were devastated to walk away from the work, but also immensely grateful for what we learned from the experience. We’re not sure where we’ll head next in our careers—whether toward research or the front lines of public health—but we now know we can pivot away from bench science if we choose to. Our doctoral training has equipped us with skills transferable to just about anything, as long as we remember to take care of ourselves.

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Tracing contacts, finding ourselves
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