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Family Development in the Pandemic Era

For some background, I was born and raised in northern Jersey. I'm the eldest of 4 children, and grew up with a lot of responsibility, as the "oldest" of the family. Growing up, my mom used to tell me that I am the "second mom" of the house, and expected me to help my parents "take care" of my siblings. My parents worked long hours, so my grandma took care of me, my sister, and my brother until we were school age. Later, after my youngest brother was born, my mom became a stay-at-home mom, while my dad continued to work long hours and sought out business ventures to support the family financially. However, my siblings and I did not feel that home was "safe" for us because of all the marital conflict between our parents. Our dad exploded in anger at unpredictable times, had a tendency to break furniture, and at times hit us. Our mom also expressed her anger at our dad, and was generally cold and strict towards us. Our parents started to get along better after we all moved out, and they became empty-nesters for a brief time.

My siblings and I are close because we developed similar perspectives about our family. We stayed in touch with our parents out of obligation, but not necessarily because we love our parents. All four children prioritized internships and summer classes, over family vacations and even holiday visits. Out of the four of us, I visited home the most, and then my brother in the middle chose to move back home. My sister moved out to LA because she wanted to "get away from our parents." My youngest brother also lived in the city right after college, but he and I both moved home at the start of the pandemic lockdown in NJ. With that said, we definitely struggled in the beginning, getting used to being with our parents again. It felt like we were thrown back into how things used to be growing up. My parents put a lot of expectations and pressure on me to run the household, and I pushed back, which they were not used to.

With that said, it took several tough conversations with my parents to let them know how I felt growing up as the oldest and address the pressure they put on me to be the "good daughter." I also had to confront them about their reliance on me for any information about their other children. It took a few awkward moments for them to finally stop asking me about my siblings, and to start calling and texting them directly. I realized that I acted as the family "operator" and

both my parents and siblings spoke to each other through me. My mom is still working on checking in on us, but I don't think that she will change any time soon. I learned that I have to let go of this idea of what kind of "mom" I wanted her to be. As for my dad, he was diagnosed with kidney failure towards the end of 2020. It brought on a lot of changes in my dad to become softer and more understanding towards our family.

During the early part of the pandemic lockdown, my sister was the only one who lived apart from us, but we all spent a lot of time playing card games. Our siblings scheduled a lot of virtual game hang outs as well. It lasted only for a few months before everyone started retreating to their own rooms. However, with my dad's health crisis, our family came under a lot of stress, so it was a sensitive time for us all. My sister felt the tension the most because she started to visit more often than she used to. She noticed our unavailability toward her and she expressed her hurt by that. She and my brother (in the middle) eventually had a falling out, a couple months after he gave his kidney to our dad. My sister has been unpredictable about when she will come visit, but we also saw this with our youngest brother. He eventually moved back to the city, but he visits more often than before, but randomly without any notice. I didn't realize how disconnected we are as a family until I started this program at Alliance. After working on the genogram project, I realized how much I want connection for our family, but I imagine that my siblings feel the same longing.

At different points during the pandemic, I heard perspectives from each family member, randomly and for school assignments. It may have happened this way because of my previous role growing up as the communication hub for my family. My sister shared with me a few times about her newfound appreciation for family. I also had a handful of deep talks with my brothers separately about things they noticed about our family. I found myself having different conversations with each parent about their frustrations with our family. We all agreed that our family has a lot to work on, but at least the siblings like each other. It seems that my siblings keep an emotional distance from our parents, which might be healthier for them at the moment. But I hope that they will get to a place to forgive our parents, and learn more about how our family dynamics impacted them over the years. For the most part, I would say that by God's grace, our family continues to keep in touch and the communication lines remain open. It still feels like "missed calls," but I really believe that since the pandemic, our family has healed and shifted away from our former ways of relating to each other.