

August Angst

Category: Feeling Anxious

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | August 1, 2018

I think I was born feeling anxious. If nothing external causes my anxiety, then I find internal reasons: a slight pain in my side, an ache in my head, a bump on my leg. However, once a year—every August—my anxiety leaps off the chart. It is time for my mammogram.

In my early years, I did not worry about breast cancer. I had small breasts and paid little attention to them. Then, one year after my son was born, Happy Rockefeller made all women aware of breast cancer by announcing in 1974 that she had the disease. Her words pushed me, a twenty-seven-year-old, into a state of anxiety—constantly checking my breasts, asking my husband to check, making countless physician's appointments for more "professional" exams. When I discovered a lump and had to have a biopsy, I almost crossed the fine line between sanity and madness.

Four biopsies later—all benign, thankfully—I still have anxiety when it is time for my mammogram. I do not obsess about the machine itself—how it flattens my breasts into human pancakes. I have no issues about modesty.

Instead, my anxiety stems from that "what if" feeling—what if this time the test discovers a lump and the lump turns out to be malignant? As I sit in the pre-examination room, waiting for my name to be called, I imagine going through the remainder of my life without breasts. I imagine weeks and months of chemo and radiation, losing my hair, feeling my mortality creep closer and closer to me. After the test, I pray I do not get the call telling me I need another test, that the initial one was unclear or may have shown something.

My brain shouts at me that feeling anxious will not change the results or help me deal with any tests that show signs of cancer. My children, sounding as logical as Mr. Spock from "Star Trek," try to convince me that my anxiety only causes unnecessary stress and that if, heaven forbid, the mammogram shows cancer, we will deal with it as a family. My anxiety, however, prevents me from hearing any rational, calming words. Nothing will reduce my anxiety until the mammogram report says "all fine."

And then, after sighing with relief, I will find something else about which to be anxious for the next eleven months until August angst from my mammogram returns.

*Ronna Edelstein
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*