

# The Needle

Category: Feeling Anxious

written by Sarah Zhang | September 9, 2018

She's the first patient of the afternoon at the pediatrician's office where I work, here for her annual check-up. She's fourteen. A straight-A student. Taking lifeguard lessons this summer. She's yearning for maturity, in her four-inch gray suede pumps and billowy striped romper. She's been doing well, has no health problems at all, but it's time for a routine immunization. The moment we mention the word "needle," however, her face crumples, she starts to cry, and her cheeks redden.

Her precocious, composed presence is gone without a trace. "I can't, I can't," she says, as she strides out the door. We try to beckon her back, but she's already out in the parking lot.

It takes ten minutes for her dad to coax her back inside. We tell her that the vaccination will prevent her from getting sick and that it won't hurt much, but that's not what bothers her. It's the thought of it, she says, that makes her heart race, that makes her feel panicky. It's not rational, and she knows it. But that doesn't make her dread, her uncontrollable fear, any less real.

It's better to get it over with quickly, we explain. Don't give your anxiety time to build, we say.

In the end, she's a brave girl. She's still sobbing as she sits in her mother's lap, but she agrees to the shot. And she takes it like a champ. The needle is in and out before she knows it. Within a minute, she's smiling again, the ordeal already in the past.

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