

Breathless

Category: Fatigue

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | September 1, 2020

In B.C.—the “Before Covid” world—I always woke up before my alarm, set for 6 a.m., rang; by the time I was ready to teach at 9 a.m., I had often done laundry, dashed to the grocery store for a few necessities, and dusted at least one room of my apartment. If I napped, which I rarely did, it was always a brief respite to get a second wind. When I finally retired for the night—usually at 9 p.m., with time set aside for reading—I slept well, confident that I had led a productive, rewarding day.

Since March 14, the day I began self-quarantining, my energy level has become depleted. The less I have to do, the more fatigued I feel. My alarm jolts me awake at 8 a.m.; by 10:30 a.m., I am lying on the couch, eager for my first nap of the day. I do ride my stationary bike, but because I set it at a tension of zero, it does not demand a lot of physical input. Two or three daily naps interfere with my nighttime sleep; I wake up in the morning feeling physically exhausted.

But it is the mental fatigue that really plagues me. With no job—teaching writing to university students—my mind seems to have stagnated. Reading does exercise my mental muscle, but I can only read for a finite period of time before my eyes betray me. My lack of external stimuli has caused me to look inward—and to focus on the negatives caused by COVID-19: unemployment for my adult children and me; the closing of the theaters that nurture me; the inability to hug another person and feel the warmth of their touch.

And now, I am struggling to find the energy to breathe. Anxiety has caused my breathing to turn shallow, making me feel as if I am in the midst of a 24/7 panic attack—or on the brink of a fatal heart attack. I spend my days trying to catch my breath, usually by yawning over and over again to bring in air. Not only does the yawning intensify my chronic left jaw pain—I have had five maxillofacial surgeries and have a prosthetic implant—but it also tires me. It takes a lot of effort to breathe.

Fatigue is aging me, stealing from me the joie de vivre and energy I once had. I feel broken—and breathless.

*Ronna Edelstein
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*