



The Fine Line Between ‘Fear’ and ‘Vigilance’ at the Doctor’s Office

By Ilana Jacqueline

I STOPPED BEING scared of going to the doctor at a young age. If I learned one thing growing up with a primary immune deficiency disease, it was that infections don’t just “go away” on their own. They stick around. They get worse. They replicate until your throat is white or you’re too weak to get out of bed. I learned it’s important to go to the doctor to get medicine. Even though I might have dreaded the strep test or the exasperated way my pediatrician looked at me, I knew that if I wanted to feel better, I had to go.

I grew up. I had surgeries under general anesthesia. I had scopes for my gastrointestinal and sinus problems. When I developed an eye infection in my early 20s, I allowed a doctor to pull stitches out of my numbed eyeball while I was wide awake.

I was not someone who was afraid of the doctor.

When dysautonomia joined my bandwagon of unwanted conditions, I got over any fear of needles I once had. I had to have fluids multiple times a week through an IV, so there was no room for phobia.

So, it surprised me the other day as I sat in my car in my infectious disease doctor’s parking lot, that I was flooded with an unfamiliar sensation of anxiety. I had just come out of an 11-day hospital stay during which I’d had two surgeries: one to have my port pulled out due to infection, and another to correct the damage done by the surgeon who pulled out the port.

The first surgery was mind-blowingly bad. I was wide awake for the entire procedure. I was given topical anesthesia, but I felt every slice, dice, yank and knit. I screamed for the doctor to listen to me;

I pleaded with her to knock me out. By the time the surgery was over, I was in complete shock, shaking, unable to comprehend the situation I’d just been put through. She sewed up the infected area, and two days later, I was back in the operating room getting the infected tissue removed and leaving a giant hole in my chest.

worse. And not speaking with my doctor about it after it failed to resolve on its own continued to make it worse. And while I do think the anxiety of the botched surgery will fade over time, it gave me an invaluable reminder: Just because we can take the punches — the tests, the tubes, the intense medications

We have to treat ourselves with the same kind of compassion and care we would recommend for others.

Just looking down at the bandages made my knees weak. But it was one bad surgeon. One bad surgery out of the many I’d already had in my life.

There is an element of trust we put in our doctors. We hand it over every time we sign a consent form, accept a new prescription or close our eyes as we’re wheeled into an operating room. We hand our bodies’ well-being over, believing we are being taken care of by people who know what they’re doing. It’s the same consent we give to pharmaceutical companies each time we try a new drug, or bare our arms for a phlebotomist to find the perfect vein.

It doesn’t matter how seasoned we are as patients. We are all vulnerable to having our trust broken. This last incident turned me upside down and inside out, and, to say the least, I’m still learning how to cope with it.

What I do know is not talking to someone about it made my anxiety

— it doesn’t mean we’re invincible. We have to treat ourselves with the same kind of compassion and care we would recommend for others.

Read your consent forms. Ask your questions. Rally your support network. Take advantage of failsafes that are there to keep patients from being put in positions in which they feel vulnerable or victimized.

I’m not the kind of person who is afraid of going to the doctor. But, everyone should remain vigilant about using their voices when it comes to treatment. ■



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