



Don't Feed the Fear: It's Going to Happen Anyway

By Ilana Jacqueline

THE OTHER day, I was staring out a bright window into a parking lot, listening to the sound of my face vibrating as my dentist drilled into another tooth. I was at peace. There was a nice pillow under the back of my head. I'd just had a new port put in last week that my surgeon had wired through my neck, which made it difficult to lean back comfortably on my own. There was R&B and jazzy holiday music playing in the background. I could hear the whir of drills going into the mouths of other patients and their subsequent moans of terror. And I thought: I fear nothing. I am a mountain. I am unmoved by your torture, Dr. Katz. You think your drill is going to upend me? No, see, you don't know what 2016 was like for me.

As a child, I was very sensitive. I feared throat cultures, contact lenses and IVs. I didn't like other people having momentary control over my body. I didn't like eye drops or teeth cleanings. But, somewhere along the way — maybe after the 10th surgery — I just let go. It wasn't easy, but I slowly warmed up to the idea that having a chronic illness meant I was going to be chronically uncomfortable undergoing procedures I disliked, and I might as well just give in. Suddenly, sticking my fingers in my eyes to put in and pull out a little plastic lens seemed like a cakewalk — at least compared to the invasive procedure of having plastic splints pulled from the depths of my sinuses after septoplasty.

Needles become a constant in my treatment of both primary immune deficiency disease and dysautonomia. So, I could not handle the stress of being afraid

every day. A big part of my transition away from fear occurred during the first few months of subcutaneous immune globulin therapy. Sticking subcutaneous needles into my abdomen? A horror show in my head, but in reality, not as many fireworks as I'd originally thought. I

nose (or in other equally disquieting places).

Once, I accompanied my mother to an optometrist appointment after she had a retinal tear. She said the repair procedure was like something out of a horror movie, but she survived it.

We don't know how strong we are until it's happening to us, until the doctor sits us down in a chair and says: "I promise this won't hurt at all."

asked my doctors to allow me to practice inserting the needles myself. I got comfortable. I realized how very little could actually "go wrong."

I've seen all kinds of horrifying procedures. Last week, I went to visit a friend in the hospital who has a gastrointestinal disease. She was doing poorly and after several surgeries, her doctors decided to place an nasogastric tube, a feeding tube that goes into the nose, down the back of the throat and into the stomach. Frankly, the idea of it makes me kind of pale. How could anyone live like that, even temporarily? But, then I remembered the look on my friends' faces the first time they saw my port and realized I had a large needle in my chest that was accessed 24/7. Rarely can you imagine the kind of discomfort you can handle until they're shoving the tube up your

We don't know how strong we are until it's happening to us, until the doctor sits us down in a chair and says: "I promise this won't hurt at all." I know it's not the cheery advice you'd like when you're staring down the optionless road of operations, but maybe before the moment comes when you need to hear "It's going to be OK," you need someone to say "It's going to happen either way."

Don't feed the fear. ■



ILANA JACQUELINE is a 27-year-old dysautonomia and primary immune deficiency disease patient from South Florida. She's been writing professionally since 2004 on everything from health and wellness to celebrities and beauty. Her blog www.letsfeelbetter.com is both a personal collection of anecdotes about life with chronic illness, as well as a resource for patients of all ages.