

My Dance With Panic

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Most of my life I was pretty quiet and good. I was a cooperative kid, and generally got along well with people. Sometimes I would get freaked out by confrontation and arguing, but I always thought I was doing okay.

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When I was about 30 I had my first panic attack. I was driving home, my three little girls were in their car seats in the back seats, and all of a sudden I couldn't breathe, I broke out into a sweat and my heart began racing and literally beating against my ribs! I thought I was going to die. I pulled off the road and put my head on the wheel. I remember Raffi songs playing for about 15 minutes and my kids' voices singing along. I was sure I'd never see them again. And then, it passed. I slowly got back on the road and drove home. I had no idea what it was. This happened about a dozen times and then I finally made an appointment with my Primary Care doc.

When I went to the doctor he told me it was stress - and I was floored. I told him I had no idea why I should be stressed - it wasn't like I had a job or anything. Then he listed: (1) you have three kids under three (2) your husband was just in the hospital for 3 months with cancer (3) your mother-in-law has been staying with you for two months (4) your teenage stepchildren just came to live with you permanently (5) you have alcoholism in your family, I had to stop him because I was about to cry!! He was very understanding, and told me to relax more, and to call him if I needed him.

I spent another 6 years trying to ignore, suppress, beat, strangle, suffocate, overcome and otherwise fight with Panic and Anxiety. It brought me an incredible array of symptoms -- choking and inability to swallow, severe headaches that I thought were brain tumors or aneurysms, chest pain, depression. I refused all meds and although I went to counseling, I believed there was just something wrong with me that I wasn't able to get better -- I mean, this was all in my head, right?

I finally found a Psychiatrist with whom I built up a relationship of trust, and he put me on Effexor to deal with Depression. It was a miracle. Once that dark blanket lifted I was able to work on many of the underlying issues that exaggerated and triggered my panic.

I've taken BusPar, Effexor and Xanax. I've used yoga, acupuncture, massage therapy and reiki to help relieve the symptoms. I've worked in Dream Groups, do deep breathing exercises, read books and have done LOTS of therapy. I exercise more. I have changed my eating habits dramatically. I journal, I write creative fiction, I paint and use clay to continually express myself and my feelings. It all helps.

And still, sometimes I panic. Sometimes I am absolutely convinced that I'm going to die - heart attack, stroke, self-suffocation (forgetting how to breathe) or some kind of quickly manifesting cancer. I also beat myself up when this happens. Less and less, but still I think "Dammit, I should be better than this" or "I should know better."

^ But, my annual physicals say I'm in pretty good health. I've had a few MRIs and my brain seems to be clear of tumors and cancers. My lungs are clear. My blood pressure is awesome and my cholesterol is fine.^ I know that physically I'm fine.^ I'm getting older, for sure, and my body is going through changes.^ But that doesn't mean that I'm going to die of some dread disease before lunch!^ For 18 years now I have been doing this dance, and for me that is what it is.^ Not a war on Panic, but a dance with life.

I see my panic and anxiety as a dance I do - not so much with death, but with life.^ And, it^ is just one of the ways I dance with life. Panic and Anxiety order - from which I still suffer sometimes - does not define me.^ It is just^ a part of me.^ And it is not all bad!

It has brought me to a place of deep spirituality. It has helped me become a real nature person - I listen to birds, watch dancing tree-tops, notice the squirrels and lizards and flowers at different times of the year. I love the beach, and rivers and the mountains (as long as they're not too high cuz that gives me the altitude sickness). LOL! So, I always thought it was a fear of death that drove these symptoms. I wanted to be there for my kids, and live a long time and do lots of creative things. But I've come to realize that mostly I was afraid of life. It was the living that got me panicked.

All the ups and downs, ins and outs, the unknowns, the spontaneous energies - good and bad - of life that I wanted to avoid. And often when I panic its around some new thing - school, having kids, losing weight, writing, painting. Some risk that I'm taking. Not necessarily a risk like jumping out of a plane, but the risk to live, really LIVE.

O^n my best days I see my panic and anxiety as a dance I do with life. I know I'm alive when I'm shaking in my boots, when my heart is racing and when I'm super focused o^n my breathing, swallowing or headache! The symptoms often pass. A xanax will really help me relax when nothing else does. And it's okay. Each and every thing I do to reaffirm my life and my willingness to live it is okay. I wish I could be like this ALL the time, but I can't. And that's why I think of it as a dance. And the more I dance, the better I am!