

I Have the "Jolie Genes"

ThirdAge Health Close-up: Im a Breast Cancer Survivor

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By **Cheryl Krauter MFT**



When Angelina Jolie announced that she had chosen to have a double mastectomy because she carries the *BRCA1* gene, the Internet lit up and social media went crazy with opinions. While there is concern that people may panic and rush to their doctors demanding surgery, I believe it is more important to focus on the gift that Jolie has given by sharing her message of taking charge, where and when it is possible. In the world of cancer, you don't always have that possibility.

I speak from experience. In 2007, at the age of 55, I was diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer of my right breast. Six years ago genetic testing was not prevalent and therefore I had no warning that I might contract the disease, an aggressive and rare form often associated with the *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* mutations that the media have now dubbed "Jolie genes".

However, a year after my diagnosis and lumpectomy, my surgeon strongly suggested that I be tested because a sentinel node biopsy revealed two positive nodes. I had joined the ranks of those with a high risk for recurrence of cancer. I made the choice to go ahead with the blood test that would inform me of my *BRCA* status. I was not considered young, but I certainly didn't feel old enough to be put out to pasture. And I had a son who was fourteen years old at the time.

I learned that the names *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* stand for breast cancer susceptibility gene 1 and breast cancer susceptibility 2 respectively. The likelihood that breast and/or ovarian cancer is associated with a harmful genetic mutation can often be higher in families with histories of multiple cases of breast cancer, as well as those with an Ashkenazi (Central and Eastern European) Jewish background and women of African American descent. However, not every family member carries the mutation and not every person who carries the harmful mutation will develop breast and/or ovarian cancer. I am a good example of an anomaly for this type of cancer. I have no close family history of breast or ovarian cancer and no known Ashkenazi Jewish background, although the name Krauter is associated with Ashkenazi Jewish heritage.

When I returned for the results of my tests, the genetic counselor informed me that I was *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* negative. I burst into tears. I cried twice over having cancer, once when I was alone in my hospital bed after the lumpectomy revealed that the cancer had spread to my lymph nodes and second when I received the news that I was *BRCA* negative. I hadn't really been aware of the fear and distress that I had been carrying within myself.

Four years later, I am now aware that there are other genetic mutations that can be involved with a diagnosis of triple-negative breast cancer. The *BRCA* test doesn't cover these. I had further tests and continued living with the uncertainty of the "wait and see" world of cancer survivorship. In that world, the fear of recurrence usually sits in the corner of the room or, as time moves on, outside the door of the house. Fear of being diagnosed with cancer is present for those who carry a genetic mutation. You can smell the fear in the comments and discussions that are popping up over Angelina Jolie's news, especially since her aunt has now died of breast cancer. It's a natural fear and, when normalized, can be faced like the monsters in our dreams. Living with the uncertainty of life can be managed with some preventative measures and we can do our best to lead a healthy lifestyle, but we have no guarantees. All we have are the moments of our lives and the choices we make in those moments.

I was fortunate. I'm still around to make choices and to live each day as fully as possible.

Oh yeah, did I mention that it took me nearly three years to pay off the bill for genetic testing. But that's another story ...

Cheryl Krauter MFT is an Existential Humanistic psychotherapist with over thirty years of experience in the field of depth psychology and human consciousness. With a background in theater arts, she has worked extensively with performing artists and visual artists. In addition to her private psychotherapy practice, she is a part of the Free Therapy Program at Women's Cancer Resource Center in Oakland, California. Please visit <http://www.breastcancersurvivorsupport.com/>

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