

Breast Cancer Awareness Month: What Does It Mean to a Plastic Surgeon? By Alex Lechtman, MD

October has been chosen as Breast Cancer Awareness Month – a time when people focus more effort on promoting the various causes that support breast cancer patients, families and research.

This horrible disease takes something more from a woman than just her breast. For many, it takes a huge part of who they are as a person. While some might scoff at the idea that removal of skin and fat changes who they are or what kind of person they might be, those that have a family member or friend who has gone through surgery and chemo and radiation know the toll it takes on a person. Those that take care of these people know the toll it takes.

The loss of a breast makes a huge psychological impact. Does this disease mean I am any less of a woman? Will it change who I am to my children, my spouse? Will they look at me differently than before? These and many other questions go through people's minds as they grapple with this disease and the treatments currently available. I'll never forget being a second year General Surgery resident working at a Kaiser hospital in Sacramento. It was a normal day in the clinic where I needed to do the preoperative assessment on a patient before her mastectomy for breast cancer. While this was not the first time I had done this, it was very early in my career and when things are new, you're more aware and less in a routine. I walked in and introduced myself to a young woman in her mid 30s. While getting the information I needed, she began to sob uncontrollably. Not knowing what else to do, I hugged her. It was then that she expressed all of the things I mentioned earlier. It was then that I had some tiny idea of what all women go through, in one form or another.

Plastic surgeons are not miracle workers. We don't operate without scars and we don't have magic wands to fix things. We use our training and our skills in everything we do. Breast reconstruction after mastectomy is just one part. But for some of us, it's a big part. We get to meet amazing women and amazing families and become a part of them. We work to give back, in a small way, something that has been taken from them. It truly is a partnership and one I cherish each day with each patient I take care of. I hope people remember that breast cancer is not just a disease, but something that takes a bit of who we are. I feel fortunate to be able to give something back.

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