The cultural narrative of individuals battling with cancer—cancer survivors—is ubiquitous. In recent years, there is a new cultural narrative of individuals battling with cancer; however, these individuals do not in fact have cancer nor have they ever had cancer. These individuals, known as previvors (short for “survivor of a predisposition to cancer”), often feel like they too are facing a cancer battle because they face a high risk of developing cancer due to a positive result on a genetic test for hereditary cancer, a family history, or any other predisposing factor.

In this presentation, I will outline three factors that have played a role in this phenomenon. First, the ubiquity of breast cancer activism and media coverage coupled with the extreme fear many women have of this disease provided the cultural context in which the identity of previvor could develop and gain prominence. Second, the organs the BRCA mutations target are closely linked to one’s sexual and reproductive self and so their loss is felt more deeply than the loss of other organs that are not as intertwined with our identity. Third, besides oophorectomy, there is no standard of care for women with a BRCA mutation; thus the difficult decision, along with the corresponding blame, guilt, etc., to adhere to early detection strategies such as mammography or have a prophylactic mastectomy rests in the woman’s hands.

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