Bed Head

Joe Westmoreland rouses himself long enough to recount his never-ending struggles with fatigue

January 1, 2004 By Joe Westmoreland

Waking up is not a problem. Every day at 9 a.m., the sound of 30 or so preschoolers screaming their Keds off blasts out of the open windows of the daycare center below my apartment. It's *getting* up that's the nightmare: My body feels like rubber. My mind's in a total fog. By the time I work up the energy to crawl out from between the sheets, those rambunctious rugrats are practically sprouting body hair.

Considering all the HIV-related crises I've survived over the years—KS, wasting, CMV—I never dreamed that common, everyday fatigue would be the toughest one to overcome. What's truly tiresome about my tiredness is that I don't know for sure what's causing it: one, some or all of the dozen meds I take? HIV itself? The fact that I'm over 40? All of the above? These questions, in turn, raise more unsettling ones: Is fatigue simply a part of "long-term survival"? As the beneficiary of HAART therapy, should I just shut my mouth and be grateful that I'm alive?

I know that sleeplessness is part of the problem: My usual nightcap of five meds includes Sustiva, which often makes me hallucinate before I drift off—my bedside radio once morphed into a dollhouse—and gives me disruptive dreams. Another culprit could be the stress my meds put onmy liver, but a recent biopsy showed that, all things considered, it's holding up fine. My doctor thinks I "don't have anything to get out of bed for." When he said that, I wanted to scream at him: "Staying healthy and fighting AIDS is a full-time job!"

But I didn't have the energy.

Here are some of the things I've tried in order to combat my fatigue: Yoga. Vitamins. Vitamin B-12 mixed with testosterone shots. Maintaining a positive attitude. Taking Percocet and OxyContin to relieve painful neuropathy in my feet. Taking the antidepressant Lexapro. Drinking coffee. Stopping coffee. Drinking tea. Switching to green tea. Acupuncture. Injections of Procrit and Neupogen to build red and white blood cells. Cutting out sugar. Napping. Taking a day off from all doctors' appointments. Going to the gym because "the more energy you build, the more energy"…zzzzzz. Sorry! Drifted off there.

Easily the wackiest anti-fatigue tack I've taken was a visit to"internationally recognized healer" Dr. Eric Pearl (he's trained as a chiropractor). I finagled an assignment to interview this handsome guruat a New York hotel. When he ushered me into his suite overlooking the city's glittering

harbor, my energy level perked up immediately! He explained that he allows energy to move through him to the patient and asked me to remain “childlike” and “open.” But as he spoke, my mind wandered to a realization: I hadn’t come to see Dr. Pearl to relieve my fatigue; I wanted him to rid me of AIDS. I’d never have to take my meds again.

Shortly after my sexy but not terribly productive encounter with Dr. Pearl, I unexpectedly scored two weeks vacation at my acupuncturist’s country house (now *that’s* alternative medicine!) And I had a real rest. I breathed good, clean air and spent a lot of time just sitting and staring at the sky. I confess that when I came home, my fatigue hadn’t lessened. But on some deeper level, my batteries were recharged. For the first time since my first major illness eight years ago, I was able to remember who I was before I got sick, before AIDShit. And remembering all the dreams and plans I had got me going. Now, when those high-pitched screams wake me up at 9 a.m., I remind myself that fatigue’s a bitch—but I’m not going to wear myself out about it.

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