You Can’t Take It With You

So he takes it to the limit

August 1, 1998 By Stephen Gendin

Am I suicidal? Or just crazy? I sometimes wonder, pondering why I do the things I do. My list of bad behaviors isn’t long—eating poorly, sleeping little, always on the go with friends or business, dancing the night away on drugs—but such things can be deadly for me. While it’s true that half the 31-year-old gay guys in New York City do the same, most aren’t HIV positive with low CD4 cells and an astronomically high viral load.

Courting disaster is one way to look at it, but that’s not my preferred analysis. Rather, I see it as pursuing my vision of the good life while I still have the strength and spirit to do so. Still, all things in moderation: Would eating one less Big Mac a week make me miserable? Do I really need to stay up till 2 a.m. watching old Star Trek reruns?

Consider last New Year’s Eve. It was a bad time for me. I was battling out-of-control diarrhea. I had the worst chest cold of my life; I could feel the fluid flowing around the bottom of my lungs. And I was overwhelmed by fatigue. Yet I couldn’t give up my New Year’s Eve ritual of going to Twilo, my favorite club. I’d celebrated the last three years there, dancing shirtless with thousands of men in a writhing pool of ecstasy. These all-night parties are as close as I get to God, and I desperately wanted to make it a fourth.

My lover and I spent a quiet evening at home, letting my body rest. At the appointed hour, we put on our party clothes and headed out. Partying for me involves drugs, and this night was no different. There was crystal, Special K, a few hits of Ecstasy: A different kind of drug combo, one that I’m almost as familiar with as AZT/3TC. But whether it was the prescription downers (tincture of opium for my diarrhea, codeine cough medication for my cold) mixing with the recreational drugs or simply that my body was overtaxed, the night went wrong. I was in a stupor, unable to dance much or interact with my friends. Mostly I just leaned against my boyfriend and babbled. At times I felt infantile, totally dependent on him. When I needed to take a shit, he came into the stall with me because I was so weak. I began to panic: Was I getting condensed in one night a preview of my eventual decline into helplessness, confusion and desperation? I cursed my imagination and tried to stay calm.

By dawn my mind was clearer, but my lungs were worse. I remembered my doctor’s warning that if I didn’t take care of myself, I could come down with pneumonia. That’s when I really freaked. I

rushed out of the club with my boyfriend and—ever practical—made a quick pit stop at home to get my insurance card before racing off to the ER.

In the end, it was a false alarm. I didn't have pneumonia; my lungs were clear. I had suffered an anxiety attack, and my perceived shortness of breath was nothing but terror. My hospital discharge report had a nice handwritten note from my treating physician that read, "Say no to drugs." The next morning I was up and at 'em, and I didn't miss a day of work. My chest cold soon got better. Life went on.

And so I wonder. Am I some sort of HIV positive Evel Knievel, doing crazy stunts guaranteed to break my body? Yet, for me, all the risks are worth it because the wonders of existence come by pushing myself to extremes. Some people get enlightenment through meditation, delving quietly into their souls. But I'm not a subtle person, and I need energy—big, bad energy—to knock me down and drag me into a place where I see the meaning of life. It's these peak-and-valley encounters that get me thinking and feeling. It's how I have learned to understand friendship, love and community. I can't explain it—it's just my way.

Two months later, another big party night arrived. Despite a lot of trepidation, I went. But this time I did things a little differently: Sleeping till 7 a.m. and heading to the still-tweaking club with a full night's rest. And I cut my recreational drugs down to just a hit and a half of Ecstasy spread out over six hours. I had a good time—no stupor, no ER. For me, it was an exercise in moderation. My father, who worries about me all the time, probably sees it differently.

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