Breathing Through the Stress

Managing his anxiety is a health challenge for Devin Hursey.

June 1, 2022 By Tim Murphy

For Devin Hursey, 32, having HIV hasn't been that big a deal. Currently pursuing master's degrees in public health and strategic communications in Columbia, Missouri, he was diagnosed with HIV in 2014 and started meds a month later. His first regimen gave him tummy trouble, so he switched shortly thereafter and hasn't had issues since. He's undetectable and doesn't struggle to take his HIV meds, in part, he says, because "I don't have much of a choice—especially given that my CD4 count was as low as 90 when I was diagnosed."

It's his anxiety—the issue that underlies his getting HIV in the first place—that continues to be his biggest health challenge. He was "falling apart mentally" at the time he became positive, he says. "I was an undergrad in Atlanta, not financially stable or stably housed, and I was under a lot of stress and acting erratically."

At the end of his rope, he dropped out of school and moved back home to Kansas City, Missouri, where he tested positive for HIV. Luckily, in Atlanta, he'd volunteered at an HIV organization, so he knew all about treatment, linkage to care and patient empowerment when he signed up for services at a nonprofit clinic in Kansas City.

"I felt like I needed to be the authority when it comes to my health," he says, "because when HIV providers see young gay Black men come in so routinely, they have their mind made up about you. I was young and feisty, and I needed to be heard. As I've become an adult, I've learned I don't have to try so hard to be heard."

Since those tough days, he's in a better place. He finished his undergrad degree, and now, after a period working again in HIV services, he has a job at a store in a mall. He loves it because it's no-stress while he's earning his grad degrees. "I feel valued there, and there's something calming about its simplicity," he says of the gig.

But he admits he still struggles to manage his anxiety and has a tendency to get easily worked up over what he calls "small, random" issues. "School has always been my biggest stressor and still is," he says. "When my anxiety kicks up, I don't trust my own judgment. I become a different person—impatient, oversharing, needing attention really badly."

He's seen counselors about his anxiety but admits, "It's been a challenge for me to maintain a

therapist.” He’s afraid of taking antidepressants or other meds. “I don’t even take painkillers,” he says.

He says he’s been keeping his anxiety in check mainly by “putting limits on myself.” That means, for example, “no social media after a certain point in the night” as well as learning to recognize the signals that he’s worked up “and then waiting before I respond to someone.”

It helps, he says, that he understands his anxiety as a physiological phenomenon. “I was a psych major, so I’m familiar with what is happening on a brain level, when your receptors become fried.”

Working out at the gym with a personal trainer three times a week helps him stay centered, he says, as well as improve his lung capacity and endurance. He also enjoys the feeling of stability he gets from budgeting properly, keeping his house clean and “other things I can do proactively to lighten my load. I call it ‘adulting,’” he laughs. He also tries to eat healthily. “I buy snap peas, carrots and celery to cook with, but sometimes I just eat them raw.” And he’s a fan of Panera Bread—a Missouri-based fast-casual restaurant chain with a menu of salads, soups and other options far healthier than, say, McDonald’s or KFC.

He knows his anxiety is not completely under control, but he considers its impact now “subtle” compared with a decade ago when he got HIV. While more therapy or a meditation practice may be in his future, he feels like he has the basic mood-regulating skills to get him through grad school.

And after? “I probably want to work in HIV policy,” he says, but he’s not sure in what capacity. “I might get my PhD in public health, but it’s foggy right now.” One thing he knows for sure: He’s learned how to manage his mood. “Being stressed can be great for advocacy work, but these days, it’s easier for me to maintain some of my boundaries and recognize my limitations.”

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