Express Yourself

July 31, 2015 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Living with HIV—no matter whether you've just been diagnosed or you're a long-term survivor—is a challenge. Some of us take complicated treatments and deal with serious side effects, but most of us now have simple regimens with few, if any, side effects. The challenges most of us face these days have more to do with access to care and adherence, as well as stigma and discrimination, which seem as pervasive as ever.

These current challenges may not be as immediate as the life-and-death choices people living with HIV/AIDS faced at the beginning of the epidemic, but they're no less important in the long run for our health and wellness. Unfortunately, these challenges can still feel overwhelming for too many of us. I certainly remember feeling helpless when I tested HIV positive in 1992, which was four years before effective treatment.

Slowly but surely I found the strength to advocate for my own care and treatment. Much of why I was able to do that was finding accurate information—from POZ and other sources—to help me along my way. We hope this POZ Focus special issue will serve as such a guide for you to advocate for your own care and treatment.

Our cover gal, Gina Brown, is a great example of someone who learned how to advocate for herself. Brown was so inspired by what she learned that she now dedicates herself to helping others advocate for themselves. Looking at her roles at the New Orleans Regional AIDS Planning Council, the Positive Women's Network (their logo is on her T-shirt!) and the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, you wouldn't believe she once didn't know how to advocate for herself. Click here to read her story.

Getting educated about your options for care and treatment is just one component of looking out for yourself. Learning how to have open discussions with your health care providers is crucial, especially when it comes to your treatment. Topics such as adherence, side effects, interactions and contraindications are things you shouldn't ignore. Click here for advice on how to talk about treatment.

You'll find Brown's tips on getting more out of your health care here, and please click here to read advice from six other advocates on speaking up for yourself. Last but not least, please also go here for a checklist of things to remember for your next doctor visit.

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