Finding Strength

Scott H. sought help for his substance abuse, got therapy for his depression and found a support group for people living with HIV.

August 3, 2022 By Scott H

My name is Scott, and my story may be different than some, but it deals with an alarming issue that has affected the gay community for years. I'm talking about the "party and play" scene.

First, a little history about myself. I knew I was "different" at a young age; I just didn't know why. My mom noticed as well, as she would later tell me. When I found out what the meaning of gay was, I was 100% sure I was gay. I came out shortly after I turned 15 in 1983. It was a time of unrest and when people who were LGBTQ+ were not accepted and did not have equal rights. The HIV epidemic was in its infancy.

I grew up in a town with a population of 301, but I didn't care. I was not going to live a lie. I was gay. I got teased and got beat up, but I stood my ground on what I believed in. I was surprised that my family, for the most part, supported me. Only a few did not. A few friends stood by my side, so I was very fortunate. Some of my new gay friends weren't so lucky. High school graduation came, then I graduated from college with a graphic design degree. I worked for three years as a graphic designer at an ad agency.

In 1992, I met an amazing man and, despite us being as different as night and day, we complemented each other. And through the years, we learned to work together and actually grew to like each other's differences. Our families got along as well.

After 16 years together, two beautiful homes, two dogs, two cats and a ton of wonderful memories, my life partner said he wanted to end our relationship. He had found someone else. I was hurt. I was in shock. I was completely devastated and didn't know what to do or how to act. He was my life. I had just turned 40.

We lived as roommates for two years until I moved out of my home, my life as I knew it. I made the mistake of not getting therapy after the relationship ended. I threw myself into work, isolated

myself and became very depressed. Over the next few years, I had a few short-term relationships. It was a whole new world to me. I was lost.

Then I met a guy on a dating site. He was younger than me, but we had a lot in common, or so I thought. I was flattered that a younger guy was into me. I felt good, happy. But I didn't know that I had just set myself up to follow a very dark road for the next five years.

It was then I was introduced to the "party and play" scene. I was 45 years old. I felt dumb and embarrassed that I didn't know what that meant. I let my guard down and what I believed in. I didn't want to seem "old" or not part of this "new scene." My first introduction to the party drug crystal meth was through an intravenous injection called "slamming," and before I knew what hit me, I was hooked.

Meth made me feel confident, happy, focused and energized. I never shared needles and I got tested every three to six months. I always tested negative. Over the next three years, my partner and I were using on and off again, we fought, and then we both decided we needed to end our relationship. We knew it was toxic and we had to go our separate ways. We still loved each other.

Then I was alone again, another failure. I was getting clean, but I relapsed after only three months and became fully engrossed in the "party" scene. I let my guard down over and over again. I didn't care. I gave up on myself.

Over the next two years, my life became one of using daily unhealthy, risky behavior as well as putting myself in very dangerous situations. I was so lost and didn't even know what day it was at times, let alone if I ate or not. I was using to escape my life; I was using to escape myself.

About two weeks after I turned 50, I got a call from a local clinic. The nurse said that someone I had unprotected sex with tested positive for HIV. I was so scared. I didn't know what to think. "I was safe, wasn't I? This is just a wakeup call, right? I'll be fine." I went in and got tested and it showed that I was HIV-negative. I was so happy that I made the decision to get help for my substance abuse and take back my life.

Over the next few weeks, I wasn't feeling too well. I had body aches, night sweats, headaches, sore throat, etc. I thought that my body was detoxifying from the meth I had been doing for the last five years.

I went back to the clinic to see if there was anything they could do to ease the symptoms of

withdrawal. It was about three weeks after my HIV-negative test, but they wanted to test me again. They did, and within seconds I could tell by the look on their faces that it was positive. At that instance, my life changed. I was HIV-positive. The day was July 6, 2017. I was numb. I didn't know what to say.

I knew it was due to my ignorance, my negligent behavior and the situations that I put myself in. I survived the '80s and '90s, when HIV was a death sentence. I remembered how many friends I had lost during that time. And then I survived all the way up until 2017. How? Why? I knew how. I knew why. I had let myself down.

But right away, I found my strength and my will to survive and decided to take back my life. I sought help for my substance abuse, got therapy for my depression and found a support group for my HIV. I also started eating right, working out and got myself healthy.

I started taking HIV medication and, within six months, I was undetectable and have been ever since.

I didn't share my story because I wanted sympathy or for people to feel sorry for me or even to showcase all my failures and hard times. I share my story to educate people in my gay community of what can happen and to know how dangerous the "party and play" scene is and what it does to your morals, values and beliefs. Before you know it, it will take over your soul. It will take over your life.

I want my story to inspire people to know how easy it is to get hooked on drugs and how easy it is to lose the ability to take care of yourself. You have one life to live and only one life. So make it count. It is up to us to take care of our mind, body and spirit.

I let the party scene, meth, my ignorance, my broken heart and my ego control my life, and it almost took my life. But through the grace of God, my family, my friends, my doctor and her amazing team and my work, I am here to say that I am healthy, undetectable, happy and at peace with myself. It took me a long time to forgive the lost person I once was, but I found myself again. As the next few chapters of my story begin, I want people to know that my past does not define me. I am still that caring, kind, loving, thoughtful, quirky guy. And the sky's the limit! Peace.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Quirky, funny, inquisitive.

What is your greatest achievement?

My 27-year career as a health care provider. It gives me great joy to be able to help someone in need. If I can make them smile and laugh, my heart smiles.

What is your greatest regret?

Losing the confidence that I once had. I'm slowly regaining it one day at a time.

What keeps you up at night?

Overthinking! But I'm working on that!

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

Probably the side effects of the meds. But I have my life back, and I am so very grateful for that.

What is the best advice you ever received?

Be yourself, no matter what. Be you!

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

My HIV case manager, Michelle. She is so supportive and caring. She is amazing.

What drives you to do what you do?

My strength and my will to survive. I get that from my amazing mom.

What is your motto?

"One day at a time" and "never go to bed angry."

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

Milo, my cat…my life.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A dog, because they are so loyal and love their owner unconditionally.

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