Keep Fighting

In a post titled "Fighting My Way Up," POZ blogger Aundaray Guess reflects on his struggles with adherence to his HIV medications, which led to drug resistance, and his eventual success on treatment. Below is an edited excerpt.

January 9, 2017 By Aundaray Guess

I recently received the best news one living with HIV could hear. I learned that my CD4 count is 851 and my viral load is undetectable. This is such good news, as long ago I could barely reach a count over 200. In fact, my lowest point was a count of 50.

My bout with low CD4s was born from the fact that I didn't have a strong connection to the "why" of taking my HIV medications regularly. Yes, I knew that each time I didn't take my meds I was playing with my health. I was warned numerous times by professionals and a few caring friends that I should either not take them at all if I couldn't commit fully or take them faithfully. They knew the dangers of building a resistance to meds if I allowed myself too many holidays, those periods when I refused to take my pills.

Unfortunately, there was a point in my life when drug resistance became my reality, as I missed one too many doses. That was my wake-up call. I didn't believe it could happen to me. Even then, there was a small voice in the back of my head that whispered, "Now you have what you always wanted: no more pills." The downside was that I was on my own as I stripped my army of its weapons and left it on the battlefield defenseless. The doctor simply couldn't prescribe me anything that would counter my resistance.

Instead of navigating my earlier meds—which at the time were only two pills a day—I was now doing anything to not get sick as the reality of having a weakened immune system came into play. I kicked myself; it seemed all was lost. But I also gave myself a slight reprieve and looked at why taking HIV medication was so difficult for me.

Reviewing my challenges, I noted the following: I was dealing with untreated depression, which blurred my decision-making; I believed that my passing from HIV was coming anyway, so why prolong it?; as a Black person in America, when dealing with the many episodes of racism, both micro and macro, I asked myself, Why do I want to be on Earth for this?; and my home life was in flux, so consistency in general was difficult, and taking meds regularly was even harder.

They may sound like excuses, but I was struggling with these issues and never took the time to address them. The bright side of becoming resistant is that it made me ask how I got there in the

first place. Knowing the genesis of my situation helped me to face what was holding me back. The turning point was when a new class of HIV medications was approved. It seemed I was given a second chance.

My punishment—if you can call it that—was going from two pills a day to 10, but by now, I started to see the value in taking the pills despite how many.

My reward came slowly as my CD4 count started to rise. It eventually started to rise above the 200 mark, something in all my years I could never do. Then 400 became my reality and then the upper 500s. I was then introduced to the low 600s. For that accomplishment, I was placed on a simpler once-a-day three-pill regimen.

It seems that was all it took to help me reach the highest set of numbers I ever witnessed: 851.

For those struggling with medication adherence, know it’s possible. It’s not always easy, but once you address the roadblocks standing in the way of taking your medication, you will discover how doable it really is.

It wasn’t an easy fight for me, and there were many lessons. But in the end, I seemed to be the winner. My fight with medication adherence showed me that I’m a long way off from being down for the count!

Go to poz.com/blogger/aundaray-guess to read more of his posts.

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