



To Stay Positive, Embrace the Negative

We must process what is lost to welcome what is next.

August 11, 2025 By [Mark S. King](#)

My therapist, Aaron, always leans forward as he sits with his hands neatly folded, indicating openness and interest. His posture may also convey patience, because I am on the sofa across from him doing everything but getting to the topic at hand. I talk nervously about my choice of beard dye, pick at my shoelaces and tell his dog lying on a mat nearby that he is a very, very good boy.

Aaron gently nudges me toward what brought me into counseling this time around: aging. My existential late-night anxiety attacks. My fears about what comes next, whether next year or in the Great Beyond.

“Yeah, but doesn’t all that sound a little ludicrous?” I counter, trying to dismiss my own anxieties. “I made it out of the 1980s without dying of AIDS. I’ve lived with HIV for 40 years. I should be grateful. And I am. I really am. I write about joy all the time.”

He considers me for a moment. “That is what is known as toxic positivity,” he responds.

Aaron doesn’t know that the words toxic and positivity carry a lot of baggage for people living with HIV, especially when the two words are linked together. I let it go. It’s one less thing I feel compelled to explain to him. My therapist is half my age.

**His words got my attention. I felt like a silly old man,
fixated on the gulf between our ages.**

Already, I made him look up Peter Max on his laptop because he wasn’t familiar with the artist

when I mentioned him. And I needed to explain that a “trick” was what gay men called a one-night stand way back when Reagan was ignoring AIDS. During our last session, I actually launched into a tutorial on the musical legacy of Laura Branigan.

My outdated points of reference have begun to make me feel like an ancient item on Antiques Roadshow that’s handled with white gloves.

“Toxic positivity,” Aaron continues, “is when we overemphasize the positive and deny the things that are troubling us or bring us hardship. I would really like for you to consider this. If you’re going to address your aging process and the challenges that come along with it, you must walk across those coals and feel the heat. If you don’t process, even grieve, for what is lost, there is no way to make room for what comes next.”

His words got my attention. Maybe Aaron is onto something, I thought, then, almost immediately, I felt like a silly old man, fixated on the gulf between our ages and missing the forest for the trees. I am entering a stage of life in which the vast majority of people are younger than me. If I don’t show some respect and engage with them, there won’t be anybody left to talk to. Before long, it’ll just be me and Cher.

Besides, Aaron was drawing from a playbook I’ve been using for years. His words reminded me of my usual advice for people who have recently tested HIV positive.

“People are going to tell you how great the medications are now and how you’re going to live a long, normal life-span,” I always counsel the newly diagnosed. “That is true, and those people mean well, but make no mistake about it: Testing positive is still a major life event. There are downsides, including being rejected socially and sexually. If you need time to freak out, to grieve for no longer being HIV negative, then do it. Freak out but not for too long. At some point, you need to get to work, start your treatment plan and get on with your fabulous life.”

I realized that for years, I have been steering people away from toxic positivity by encouraging them to process their dramatic change in HIV status to make space for whatever comes next.

Well, Survivor, heal thyself. The time has come for me to apply that very same strategy to growing older.

I will start with the most obvious, and the most emotionally challenging, aspect of advancing age: my physical body. No longer am I the guy who strips in a gym locker room without care. Even

when I step out of the shower at home, I keep my eyesight above my shoulders when looking in the mirror. I can't even linger on my face for too long. My teenage acne scars have settled in more deeply, and my once-prized ginger hair has faded in color and thinned. Below all that, my body carries extra weight like unwelcome cargo.

"Walk through the coals and feel the heat," Aaron advised. So the other day, I forced myself not to avert my eyes and do a very personal inventory. It takes courage and more than a little grace for oneself.

This body has been through a lot, I thought, conducting a careful study. It has been through decades of toxic medications, drug addiction and emergency surgeries. It has spent countless hours dancing into the late night. It has been pushed to its limits and sometimes beyond. It has been in great peril but enjoyed even greater pleasures. That history is written across my skin. I can feel it in my joints. What lies ahead for this body of mine?

I watched some elders at the gym the other day. They were exercising in a huge glassed-in room in view of the entire workout floor, where I was lifting weights while wiping away my late-middle-aged sweat. Inside the room, there was a sea of silver hair crowning more than 50 people sitting in chairs. Some of them were wearing sparkly bracelets and others sported brightly colored headbands. They were exerting themselves yet smiling.

The instructor had them raising their hands above their heads, stretching slowly from side to side. They looked like a crowd at a rock concert moving in slow motion.

I didn't want to turn away. Something pulled me to them. I felt a strange urge to join in. Maybe not that day, but sometime soon. They looked so welcoming, and I felt so tired from the free-weight lifts and the stair machines.

Something in me ached for the day that I could just step into that room and take a seat and raise my hands above my head. Is that part of what is next for my body, and can I make room for it? Can it be something beautiful?

My sexuality has changed too, and there is so much to mourn if I have the courage. "Process, even grieve, for what is lost," Aaron told me.

There used to be a strut in my step, a time when I felt built to conquer. Sex was easy, fast and mine for the taking. It was also a whole lot of fun, even after we all learned to negotiate the new

rules of HIV transmission—and when we sometimes skirted them.

My exploits also led to sexual compulsion and to relationships more transactional than romantic. Real intimacy was often beyond me, regardless of what I would approximate in the bedroom.

Things have changed. For years, after our initial courtship and the passion that comes with it, my husband and I would set up date nights on a weekly basis. But then a new episode of our favorite show would come on, and we would choose instead to enjoy a night on the sofa with a pint of ice cream.

My sex life has been largely replaced with holding my husband through the night, sometimes migrating to the far side of the bed as I sleep but always returning to hold him close again, just to be sure of him. It is the greatest intimacy I have ever experienced.

**My past reluctance makes it that much more important
for me to tell people how much they mean to me.**

I might have once believed that this kind of sex life was a little sad. Now that I'm here, at this age and in this space, it isn't sad at all. It feels right.

Can I embrace what lies ahead for my sexuality—for what is here now, in fact—and can it be wondrous?

The most profound changes from growing older concern my sense of community. My friendships have always been plentiful, ranging from casual pals to workplace confidantes, friendships that are so easy to develop when you're younger and in school or building a career. Life ushers community right to your door during those eventful years.

Age changes that. My world has become smaller. The casual relationships, the scores of people I've known by name, people I might even greet with a hug, are not as present in my life. My energy no longer demands that I make every conference, every potluck, every Zoom meeting. My formerly expansive social networks have begun to condense.

Can I grieve for the extended community I once enjoyed and find a way to see beyond it? “Grieve and make space,” Aaron said.

Every Sunday evening, our home is filled with the pleasing aroma of a home-cooked meal. There is a roast or a baked chicken in the oven. The dinner table is set for six. Charles will bring the garlic potatoes I love, and Lynne will bring sourdough rolls. Leigh and Jimmy will be there too. The dinners have become a weekly ritual for our chosen family.

Whatever meaning I once assigned to my very public activism, to my quest to solve life’s riddles and hidden meanings, is somehow answered in the faces of the family we gather on Sunday evenings. It is the only answer I need these days.

The way I speak to my friends is different now. I tell them I love them. It’s not something that comes easily, but I have become much better at it.

Feeling love for myself used to be hard. There was a time when I felt so forlorn, so unworthy, so poisoned, that loving myself was a radical act. Maybe it still is sometimes. Maybe it is for you.

My past reluctance makes it that much more important for me to tell people how much they mean to me. It feels crucial, in a way it once did decades ago, when our friends began to die and we thought our world was ending.

It isn’t simply that I have aged. It is because time itself has changed. It speeds faster toward its own destination, and there are things to be said that need to be said soon, maybe even now. And the urgency makes me want to reach through these written words to make sure you are paying attention, to reach you somehow, in case you need to hear it, to hear that someone loves you.

Is this how I grieve for the broader community I once enjoyed and make room for even greater intimacies? Can they be glorious? Yes. Oh, yes.

This is my inventory of the things I have lost to time and how letting go of them has created space for what comes next. I am better for it.

A few simple, indisputable truths about our elder years have emerged from this examination. Sex and intimacy are still wondrous. Our chosen family is glorious. Our bodies are beautiful. And I love you.

Mark S. King is the author of the anthology of essays *My Fabulous Disease: Chronicles of a Gay Survivor* and a GLAAD Award winner.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/stay-positive-embrace-negative>