More Than AIDS

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I have AIDS.

I can say that now. But for many years, I would never admit I had AIDS—and it wasn't because I was in denial all that time.

More to the point, if asked about my status I would respond that I'm living with HIV.

To fully understand my reasoning is to know how AIDS was seen in the early years of the epidemic. Back then the stigma against the disease was so strong. AIDS was and still is seen as a death sentence by some. Spelled in bold red letters, AIDS meant rejection and a feeling of unworthiness.

I've had AIDS for years, but I had never said it to myself until recently. To me, AIDS was a barometer of how my body was doing. It also was a numbers game, as one of the official definitions of having AIDS was when your CD4 count fell below 200. It was a number created by the government and not one based on how you felt.

I found out I had AIDS when my numbers fell below that mark. A few numbers off and it made me part of the A-club. I believe at the time my number was 189. I had crossed that line, which according to my doctor I couldn't uncross. I was told that once you had an AIDS diagnosis you could never go back to just having HIV, no matter how high your CD4 count went. It sounded like fuzzy numbers.

Numbers then took over my life as I wanted to prove to everyone—especially myself—that I didn't have AIDS. I started to eat right, love right, and do the right things for my body and mind. I went to gyms and lifted tons of weights and ran on treadmills like my life depended on it. I ate gardens of vegetables and a bounty of fruit. Yet although I reached my highest CD4 count, 650, my medical file still listed me as having AIDS.

My mentality for a while was warped around those four letters, and my thinking soon followed. It was an "I have AIDS so why care" way of thinking. My actions soon followed with unhealthy behaviors and a blind eye to what was in my best interest. I no longer cared.

Then a moment hit me. I don't know exactly when, but at some point I no longer allowed myself to

be defined by HIV, AIDS or any numbers, whether it was CD4s or viral loads. Not to say I didn't monitor them any longer, but I had to stop letting the numbers dictate my life and how I saw myself.

I'm much more than an acronym. I'm much more than a numerical value based on my blood. I'm much more than what a doctor writes in a file with my name on it. I'm much more than AIDS.

Reclaim.

I reclaimed my life and by doing so reclaimed my purpose. I move forward on the notion that I'm defined by my ability to go after my dreams and goals. I won't let an "A" or an "I" or a "D" or an "S" bind me. I began to speak out loud about reclaiming my life so that those who are newly diagnosed don't follow my previous way of thinking.

You, yes, you reading this, are not defined by this disease. Whether you have a diagnosis of HIV or AIDS, you are greater than those words and numbers. Say it, state it, believe it and reclaim your life. You're more than AIDS.

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