A Bitter Pill

June 27, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

I hate taking pills. As I unscrew the tops from each prescription bottle and fill my hand with the various shape and colored pills I go through a robotic motion as they make a small mound in my palm. Funny thing is that after so many years of swallowing them you'd think it'd be easy. That I would operate on auto-pilot. That after fourteen years of taking many assortments of tablets, my mind would be okay with the fact that my health is dependent on something no bigger than my pinkie finger.

I had gotten away scot free for the first 12 years of my diagnosis of not having to take them. I was reluctant to even consider them when I learned of my status. It already seemed my life was now out of control and the last thing I needed was a pill to dictate how to live my life. I didn't want to build my life around a schedule of pills. Especially the pills that was available to me at the time. I didn't always want to swallow something on a full stomach or take so many hours after a meal. I didn't want dispense pills in a blue pill reminder that made me think of senior citizens. I wanted to sit in the driver seat but it seemed like more than ever I was being forced to scoot over and sit in the passenger seat.

At the time I made a deal with my doctor that I would only consider the pill if my blood count reached a point where it was in the danger zone. He didn't question me but respected my feelings as he knew that if you're not in a frame of mind to follow a daily regime, you'll do more damage if you're inconsistent with your medication. The rule of thumb is that your body will build up a resistance to the HIV drugs if you take them only when you feel like it. Having your body resistant to medications leaves you with few choices of antiviral drugs that will keep the virus at bay.

"Someone once asked me that if there was something that could save your life why not take it?" It wasn't that simple to me as I had several unspoken fears. The first fear was me not knowing what the drugs would do to my body over time. Knowing that my liver and kidney has to take the blunt of the medication and praying they have the tenacity to hang in there as I get older.

The second fear was the side effects that some of the pills can cause. I heard from other people about their ill such as headaches or upset stomachs. I didn't want to endure that. I didn't want to take a pill to take a pill, an endless merry-go-round with no gold brass ring to catch. I basically didn't want my medicine cabinet to look like a drugstore.

Speaking of drugstore, I was scared at the time of the stigma of simply getting my prescription filled. What used to be my secret would now be known by strangers behind the counter as a young

person barely out of high school rings up my co-pay. I could have looked at it as business as usual but to me it was my business and my circumstances were unusual as I still questioned why me.

My choice was finally taken out of my hand when the agreement I made with my doctor came to pass. My blood work numbers were starting to not look good and if I didn't do anything while I had the ability and my body was strong, I would probably reach a point when it would be too late.

I learned then that you are considered to have AIDS when your CD4 number went below 200. Although mine hovered around the 300 range, in a weird way I felt that as long as I had HIV and not AIDS that I was okay. I rationalized that I had it, but didn't have it. That balloon of my reality soon burst when my doctor informed me that my CD4 was below 200. I had AIDS. It was now time for me to look at my pill option.

I still don't like my pills but the reality is that without those pills I would be in a different situation. And I probably would have waited until I was lying in the hospital bed, when things were now considered to late. My argument is that I wanted control over this virus but the truth was that by letting it go unchecked, it was in control. And not in a good way.

I learned to love chocolate milk as it seemed to be the only thing that helps the pills go down without me gagging. I also learned to talk to my doctor to find a regiment that was easy for me to handle. If something didn't make me feel right I could work with him to find something that did. Luckily in all my years there has only been one pill that didn't agree with me, and it was quickly replaced. I felt I made the right choice and was using something that could help. And whatever felt stigma I perceived would happen, would have to be removed from my life as I wanted to live without the authority or perception of others.

Do I still have fears and concerns? Yes but as I see my viral load remains undetectable and my CD4 being the highest it's ever been, I feel better knowing that finally I'm no longer ignoring the actuality of my health. And for me the bitter pill I swallow is knowing that although I have HIV and I have to take medication, I also have control.

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