Is The Additional Tax of Aging With HIV Coming Due?

October 20, 2020 By Shawn Decker

Growing up in Waynesboro, Virginia, I often saw how the threshold of the age of 40 is met: with dread. Lots of jokes about having one foot in the grave. Uncles and aunts complaining of new aches and pains, bemoaning the fact that they have gotten older... truthfully, it was something I never thought I'd have to navigate, at least for a good portion of my youth.

After my HIV diagnosis in 1987 at age 11, I never looked far enough into the future to envision such a fate. I figured, if things played out the way they were expected to given my prognosis, I'd just have a really awful last year or so of my life. And I didn't really want to think about that, so I just ignored the fact that I was living with a potentially deadly virus. At age 20 that I had an epiphany: "Shit- I might only be halfway through my journey... what the hell am I going to do with the second half my life?" That thought, with a few other co-factors, is what led me to open up about HIV. I'd certainly have been less likely to go on HIV medications had I not come to that decision.

My energy levels and health certainly turned around when I started taking HIV medications for the first time at age 24. My partner, Gwenn and I, were travelling like crazy for most of our 20s, educating about HIV and sexual health together. There's no way I would have been able to do that had I not gotten my health in order. During my 30s, I felt pretty good overall. Hemophilia started to present some nagging issues, but I was able to rise to the occasion and learn how to self-infuse as a result. As I entered my 40s, the U=U movement and my effective treatment meant that condoms were no longer a necessity in the bedroom.

A mind-blowing revelation. I was entering that dreaded-by-most decade with an undetectable viral load and an unsheathed penis. What could go wrong?

Well, a few things, actually. Nothing overtly dramatic. I'm not going to complain about the white nose hairs or high cholesterol. But at 45, I do feel like I have a few years of nagging injuries under my belt. Like the 80s cover gig I did in 2017, which I can still feel at times when my neck gets a little stiff. Or my wrist, which I injured about four months ago opening a jar. I had to get an injection of steroids to get the muscles to de-seize on me. My left ankle, which has very little cartilage left in it due to decades of minor untreated bleeds into the joint, hurts more when it gets colder outside. And allergy season is now a thing, too. I sneeze you not.

So have I been a bit blindsided by this, despite knowing for two decades that I'm no longer living on borrowed time? Yes, I have. It's a little bit embarrassing, but I guess I felt entitled to an aging process that spared me of the common aches, pains and egregious humbling that comes with the territory. That being born with hemophilia, diagnosed with hepatitis B, HIV and hepatitis C would somehow give me a hall pass for all of the other things. There are so many articles on HIV, the brain and aging, and how the long-term effects of the virus and the medication used to treat it can be especially taxing...

It's quite possible that I ain't seen nothin' yet, honey...

That said, I'm okay with the fact that I might only be halfway through my journey. There's no sense of panic like there was when I was 20 and still figuring the big things out. Of course, I know that I might not live to 90. There are so many ways to go and I feel no sense of entitlement to more days ahead of me than I have already lived. The odds are against me there. The best I can do is enjoy the journey. In a way, the normalcy of aging is a breath of fresh air. Which, for me in the Spring and Fall is a hearty inhale followed by a coughing session and a thumb's up to Gwenn that I am not choking on my own saliva.

Still, even with some of the expected hurdles of aging that I am now prepared for, I know there will be some unexpected joys that I can't see coming, too. Life will continue to challenge and inspire my soul. I'll rise to some occasions and cower to others. And that's okay. The most important thing is that I have a wonderful support system and I truly know who I am. I'm lucky to be here when so many weren't afforded the years I have. I see the big picture, and while I often get lost in my little life on this planet, I'm guided by the spirits of those who have walked a similar path...

One day, when it's my time, I'll join them on that next adventure. Til then? Bring on the aches, the pains and the laughter and tears that come with it.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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