Brain Drain & HIV

May 13, 2011 By Shawn Decker

I don't carry around a lot of concerns about my health as it relates to HIV. Being diagnosed at age 11, and now living happily in my mid-30s, my view of living with HIV has gone from the early days of "I'll deal with this on my deathbed" to "I'll do my best to maintain my health, and hopefully live to see a cure of die of old age".

I prefer my mid-30s mindset. But one concern I have- and have had for quite a few years- is how HIV affects the brain over time. AIDSmeds.com has just posted an interesting article on the topic. Here's an excerpt:

"In the mid to late 1980s, up to half of all people with HIV eventually developed debilitating dementia or a serious brain-related infection. Fortunately, this is no longer true, at least not in countries where potent antiretroviral (ARV) therapy is widely available. Today, HIV-associated dementia (known as HAD or AIDS dementia complex, ADC) is rarely diagnosed. However, recent evidence suggests that HIV is still affecting people's brains--even when HIV levels are undetectable in the blood."

The articles goes on to list symptoms one may experience...

• Difficulty recalling things that you've just read or heard

• Slower recall of facts and memories

• Trouble paying attention for long stretches

• Difficulty learning new tasks

• Feelings of sadness, hopelessness or anxiety

• Diminished reflexes

• Feeling "fuzzy headed"

These symptoms are quite common in their milder form. However, they can be caused by problems other than HAND. Such problems can include CVD, coinfection with hepatitis C virus (HCV), clinical depression and anxiety--both of which are found at high rates in people with HIV--and overuse of alcohol or recreational and prescription drugs.

Read the entire article here

A lot of those symptoms listed are eerily familiar. I often say the worst part of living with HIV is low energy levels and feeling "fuzzy-headed". I make myself feel better by blaming the meds, "Oh, I'm on my week on meds," but ignore that at the end of a week off meds I sometimes feel the exact same way. I'm not foolish enough to think that a virus that can make it's way through every crevice of my being has somehow avoided my brain. I just do my best to keep my spirits up, and not worry about something I may not have much control over.

Last year, I had an appointment set up to have some testing done to see if there was anything to worry about: I canceled it at the last minute. Probably because I was afraid of the results.

The AIDSmeds article discusses how physical activity can help. Just last week, Gwenn and I rejoined the gym, and I enjoy starting every day on the stationary bike, listening to music, reading the television (Closed Captioning rocks)... just adding that trip to the gym to my daily routine should help. It's not that

I’m always tired, or always foggy-headed. I know when I’m firing on all cylinders- and I wish I could be that guy all the time. Those brief flourishes of vitality give me the proof I need that I’m not totally hopeless in terms of my brain power.

It’s funny, most 35-year olds dread their 40’s. But I’m looking forward to it. Maybe it was the fact that I met so many 40-year old positoids in my twenties, who seemed to have a well-balanced adult life. My job now is to work towards making that my reality as well.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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