Faking My HIV

June 27, 2016 By Aundaray Guess

Thirty years ago, when I just learned of my HIV status, I knew I was going to die. It was the beginning of HIV and the options of today were not available. Back then, having AIDS was seen as a death sentence. Hope didn't spring eternal for those infected as it seemed death was the only cure.

Several years passed and I was still alive. It felt like a fluke and my time would soon come. Perhaps Death had a backlog of cases and he or she was working their way to me. I accelerated the situation by developing an unhealthy lifestyle. Along with bad eating habits and refusal to take care of my body by exercising; I also engaged in unsafe sex and an attitude of simply not caring about myself.

Despite all this, my health was relatively good. I wasn't getting sick like others I knew living with HIV. Seeking support in an HIV group setting, it felt like I didn't belong. I noted people, reporting in on self, expressed their various ailments. From depression to crippling illnesses, everyone had a negative aspect of themselves to share.

I felt guilty as I shared brighter outlook. I didn't have any complaints about health or any known mental health challenges. Besides the common cold everyone got, I was in good spirits. Did I really have HIV, or maybe the doctor made a mistake? Why did I feel good? What were the others thinking of me during my positive reporting and are they looking at me as a fraud? Maybe they felt I was someone looking for attention and didn't have HIV.

Ten years from my original diagnosis and I was simply amazed that I was among the land of the living. Even that wasn't a celebration as although I was still here, I saw myself as the walking dead; shuffling through my life with no purpose. Believing the continued existence of my being was not of my doing, but a cruel happenstance.

It was then I happened upon a term called, "Imposter Syndrome". This term refers to high-achieving individuals marked by an inability to internalize their accomplishments and a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud". Reading that, it sounded so much like me and my life living with HIV.

I started to feel I was a fraud based on my upbringing when family members would express how they felt my accomplishments were good but not my own creation. I was often made to feel that any feat I completed was stolen from someone else's genius or hard work.

Even in my senior years, as I submitted my advice of living with HIV on mediums like blog posts submitted to Poz, I questioned my shared knowledge. With the advice I was distributing, was I being fraudulent, hiding behind a keyboard, misrepresenting myself?

Yet an Aha moment happened for me as I looked back and saw how I didn't give myself the credit for my successes. I had placed myself in a box, refusing to believe I had the ability to think, do, act or be good. And those moments when I started to believe, I erased it by engaging in negative behaviors.

Not to say my HIV was an accident or preordained, but what was made clear is that now understood I was always in control of this uncontrolled situation. That every moment of my life since I was exposed to HIV was not by chance. This was important to me as it helped me to shift from a destructive lifestyle into a more productive one. The bitterness and negativity I displayed toward others, born from the question, "Why me" helped me to reshape the relationships I had with others and myself. With a greater understanding of the term, "imposter syndrome", I recognized that I was not giving myself credit for my overall sense of health and well-being.

What can be done, can also be undone. That includes negative thinking of how one see self. It's a slow process but with a great reward waiting. And working my way losing any self-doubts, I've accepted my value and worth and don't feel like I'm smoke and mirrors.

Imposter Syndrome, in some ways, is similar to Survivor's Guilt, in that you question your ability to survive. In my case, I questioned my ability to thrive. But as I progress through the years, in my wisdom I have accepted the notion that I'm here for a reason. That my life is no accident. Knowing that if someone was to pull back the curtain, they wouldn't see a fraud. They would find me, Aundaray, standing in my realness.

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