Fighting My Way Up

November 3, 2016 By Aundaray Guess

Today I received the best news one living with HIV could hear. I learned my t-cell count is 851 and viral load undetectable. This is such good news as long ago I could barely obtain a count over 200. In fact, my lowest point was a t-cell count of 50. Now here I stand, my doctor informing me I was at 851! Not only did this number speak to not losing faith but it also placed a light on the issue of my struggle with medication adherence.

I'm sure there are others whose numbers are just as high and perhaps for a longer length of time. Or perhaps medication adherence was never a factor and/or they were well disciplined in managing their health. Yet there's also an acknowledgment that some find it difficult, if not impossible to get to a favorable t-cell count and stay committed to their HIV regimen.

I speak from experience as my bout with low t-cells was born from the fact I didn't have a strong connection to the "why" I should be taking my meds regularly. Yes, I knew that each time I didn't take my medication I was playing with my health. I was warned numerous times by professionals and a few caring friend that I should either not take it if I can't commit fully or take it faithfully. They knew the dangers of building a resistance to meds if I allowed myself too many holidays when I refused to take my pills.

Unfortunately, there was a point in my life when drug resistance became my reality as I missed one too many dosages. That was my wake-up call. I didn't believe it could happen to me and even then, there was a small voice in the back of my head that whispered, "Now you have what you always wanted: no more pills." The downside was that I was on my own as I stripped my army of its weapons and left them on the battlefield defenseless. The doctor simply couldn't prescribe me anything that would counter my resistance.

Instead of navigating my earlier medications—which at the time were only two pills a day—I was now doing anything to not get sick, as the reality of having a weaken immune system came into play. All the while I'm living in NYC, where germs are as rampant as the number of people living here.

I kicked myself as it seemed all was at a loss. But I also gave myself a slight reprieve as I looked at why taking HIV medication was so difficult for me. Reviewing my challenges, I noted the following:

1. I was dealing with untreated depression which blurred my decision making.

2. I had a thinking that my passing from HIV was coming anyway so why prolong it.

3. As a black person in America, when dealing with the many episodes of racism, both micro and macro, I asked myself, why do I want to be on the earth for this.
4. My home life was in a flux, so consistency was difficult and taking meds on a regular basis was even harder.

They may sound like excuses, but it was something I was struggling with and never took the time to address. The bright side of becoming resistant is that it made me stop and ask how I got there in the first place. Knowing the genesis of my situation helped me to face what was holding me back. My turning point was also when a new class of HIV medications was approved. It seemed I was given a second chance.

My punishment, if you can call it that, was going from two pills a day to 10. But by now I started to see the value in taking the pills despite how many.

My reward started slowly as my t-cell count started to rise. I finally started to rise above the 200 mark, something in all my years I could never do. 400 was soon my reality and then the upper 500s started to come into view. I was then introduced to the low 600s and for my accomplishment, was placed on a simpler once a day/three pills regimen.

It seems that was all it took to help me reach the highest set of numbers I ever witnessed.

851.

Man, it sounded so good. From a low of near 50 to 851. I write this to say for those struggling with medication adherence, know it’s possible. It’s not always easy, but once you address the roadblocks standing in your way of taking your medication, you will discover how doable it really is.

It wasn’t an easy fight for me, and there were many lessons. But in the end, I seemed to be the winner. My fight with medication adherence showed me that I’m a long way off from being down for the count!

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