Help Wanted: Unemployment and HIV

May 20, 2014 By Aundaray Guess

Times are tough in this country for everyone (well maybe not for the 'one-percenters') but the rest of us continue to endure a tough economy. Living with HIV can sometimes be difficult enough but the added uncertainty of unemployment sometimes makes it seem life is working against you. I lived through this emotion myself as the organization I worked for faced decreasing revenue. I was a great performer but when cuts had to be made, my position unfortunately was affected. Although I'm a resourceful and determined person, I didn't know how I was going to get through the storm. This new territory didn't have a road map or clear directions on how to navigate it. I've always had a job since the age of 13 so I didn't know what to expect.

Questions racing through my head were scattered and came from a place of fear. Will I be able to survive on unemployment? Will I have to deplete my savings? What will people think of me? Am I failure? Will I ever find another job? How? When? Will I only be able to afford second hand clothes? Oh yeah, what about my HIV? Yes for me, my health which is my top priority, all of a sudden fell to the bottom of the list. Facing a new first of living with HIV and being unemployed, I didn't know if or how I could manage?

When you're suddenly unemployed your HIV care can rapidly become a lesser significance as you shift into survival mode during your jobless state. As much as I take care of myself, I slowly fell into the trap of not properly handling my health. Between looking for a new job and sending out my resume I unknowingly started to develop bad habits. I began to accidently miss medication dosages or taking them at the wrong time of day. My physical activity suffered as I didn't have the motivation to work out. And if I went, my mind was so distracted with my jobless situation; I would put in half the effort. At the time I failed to realize the impact it would have on my health, but as time went on I started to see the negative results of my inactions. Instead of gaining weight I started to lose weight as the stress started to take its toll. It was hammered home to me when I visited the doctor and he informed me my t-cells were slightly lower since the last time I came in.

Sending resumes after resumes I thought the phone should be ringing off the hook. But it continued to give me the silent treatment. Having a hopeless feeling, I would sometimes tell myself I needed a nap which would last for the rest of the day. Or sometimes I just wanted to crawl back to bed and pull the covers over my head and ride out the anxiety wave.

My fallback in life has always been my support system yet being unemployed; I shut everyone out on my current circumstance. Shame allowed me to not inform my friends I didn't have a job. I

think my shame, sometimes so prevalent; I even gave power to what strangers thought about me. Wondering if they were questioning why I was home and not at work. At the moment blind to the fact I was not the only able body person who was home during the work hours. Rather than share the news with friends and family, I painted a perfect picture of bliss as I pretended everything was okay. To not share that aspect of my life meant allowing myself the chance to endure my situation alone.

The thought of receiving unemployment was humbling as I saw it as a handout. When I realized I was simply taking advantage of all the monies I placed into it when I was employed, I stopped myself thinking in such a negative way. I was also fortunate as I'm currently on my partner's health insurance so I knew my health coverage would be uninterrupted. For others who have HIV, they may not be as fortunate as they are now managing their HIV status with no health coverage. They may also fall into the purgatory of the twilight zone where they make too much money for city services yet don't have enough money to obtain coverage through COBRA. For some with HIV, HASA (HIV/AIDS Services Administration) used to be an option but with recent changes, one has to have a certain t-cell level to be approved. You have to find a solution fast as once you begin to collect unemployment, the clock starts ticking. It's for a short period of time and because Congress is in a stalemate, there's no extended benefits. I ask again, how does one manage?

Although being unemployed can be a temporary situation unfortunately your HIV status isn't. Despite your current situation you must still maintain a lifestyle which doesn't allow your HIV to rear its head. I'll share what worked for me as I faced being out of work and giving attention to my HIV status.

1) **1) Create a schedule**- If you're a structured person, having free time will be one of the hardest things to deal with. Suddenly having no structure will leave you feeling like you have no purpose and make remembering important details, such as taking your HIV meds on time, difficult. Because your HIV medication routine is on a schedule it now can fall to the wayside which will have an effect on your health. Irregular dosages can result in decreasing t-cells and/or you could become resistant to your medication.

Advice - As much as you can, maintain a schedule similar to your job. Go to bed as you usually do and in the morning get dressed, avoiding the desire to stay in your sleepwear. You still have a job, which is to find a job and approaching a job search with a focused mindset will be beneficial. Allow yourself to clock out of job searching the same time you would if you were working. Your life shouldn't be a 24 hour search for employment. This will help you develop a routine which will involve the integration of your medication. A consistent schedule will assist in not missing dosages.

2) **Get Outside-** While conducting your job search, make a full effort to not do it at home. Along with distractions, getting out the house helps with any onset of loneliness. For me, being in a social environment propelled me to not dwell on not having a job and instead I gained

focus in finding a new job. The disadvantage of staying in your home is it provides plenty of time to develop a depressive mood. HIV and depression is a bad combination as it affects not only your health but if you've struggled with addictive behaviors, they can resurface and be acted on. Isolation can also be a negative contributor to your health and should be avoided.

Advice- Try to find a coffee shop or library where you will feel comfortable to job search. If it's warm and you don't need wireless access consider creating your cover letters in the park. The key is to create a separation from your home so it doesn't feel like a workspace. Allow yourself to have lunch dates with friends. Continue to be sociable and stay connected. The goal is to deter depression and not allow loneliness to be your norm.

3) 3)**Stay physica**l- Staying healthy is important, especially when it concerns your HIV status. Staying fit will help reduce the stress of not having a job and contribute to a better overall well-being. Along with holding depression at bay, it will also encourage you to not allow your healthy diet go amiss. The benefit of working out increases a better sense of self and contributes indirectly to your t-cell/viral numbers.

Advice- Don't consider going to gym or working out a luxury. Staying physically fit is an important part of your life and helps to reduce the stress and anxiety of being unemployed. It also has the benefit of giving you a greater positive outlook not just on your job search but also health.

4) 4) **Don't keep it a secret**- We often tie our personalities to our job, so when we leave a job it usually attaches itself to our self-worth. When you begin to accept your job is what you do and not who you are, you'll have a lesser feeling of shame. Shame can prevent you from embracing your current support system and have a negative impact on the care of your HIV. It also stems the opportunity to network and access individuals who may have knowledge of other employment opportunities. The key to finding a job in today's market means networking as the old days of sending in resumes can result in failed efforts. Use your friends and online mediums such as LinkedIn to its full advantage.

Advice-Reach out and be honest about your situation. Create two separate groups, one can help support you with your HIV and emotional care and another group can help in your job search. Everyone doesn't have to know your situation but the more people who know, the more who can assist you. Also share with your doctor. You may endure stress which will probably affect matters such as sudden loss of weight and/or appetite. In addition if you're now dealing with depression, a proper temporary treatment plan can be initiated.

T

here are other areas of being unemployed and having HIV which hasn't been fully discussed such as loss

of medical coverage and tips on finding a new job in this technology age. I would love to hear from others who have HIV and if they have endured unemployment or are currently unemployed and what has worked for you.

I

’m happy to report my journey of unemployment is over but nothing is always for certain. So even if I find myself without a job again, I can fall back on my tips and still come out a success. I can also find comfort of knowing after my recent experience I have to ability to not let any situation alter the way I approach my health. That’s a job I can’t be fired from.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.