HIV Comes With Lots of Heartbreak

My three stages of recovery after being diagnosed with the virus

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My first struggle after my HIV diagnosis was my physical recovery. When I got out of the hospital (four days on a ventilator, followed by more than a week in rehab), I couldn't even walk. My husband bought me an inexpensive wheelchair and a walker and I used them for several weeks. It was nearly Christmas and I remember him wheeling me up the handicap ramp at the local Coco's for Christmas dinner. A physical therapist came to our apartment to help me with walking, strength conditioning and coordination. It seemed like that took forever, but the therapist said I was making great progress. But it was a couple of months before I could get in and out of the bathtub without my husband's help. We had the maintenance people remove the glass door to make it easier. But I knew I'd made progress when my stepdaughter came to visit me a month or so after Christmas and I watched her jaw drop when I walked (without help) out to greet her.

Then came the emotional recovery. It was hard to get out of bed in the morning and I spent a lot of time crying. My husband finally asked me if I planned to spend the rest of my life in bed. Wouldn't I rather get up and start doing something—anything? Eventually, I did. But I was still struggling with fear of what might happen. Would life ever be normal again? After another month or so, I began grappling with the question of where I'd gotten this awful disease. My stepdaughter had said it must have come from her father—my late husband of 25 years. When I'd explored all other possibilities, I finally realized she was right. But that brought up the question of where he'd gotten it. It's been hard for me to acknowledge that he must have been unfaithful. At that point, I felt like I needed a life preserver. But like all of us, I persisted and I survived.

The third phase of my recovery seems to be the heartbreak that I still experience whenever I think about him. I'm not sure I'll ever get through this phase. I've forgiven him for being unfaithful, but it breaks my heart that he was. But there's just no other plausible explanation. And it breaks my heart that in 2009, he died of AIDS when he didn't need to.

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