Does My HIV Make Me Look Fat?

When someone asks if I've gained weight, it brings old issues of body image disorder back into my life.

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"Are you gaining weight?"

My friend asked this question of me recently, and instantly I went into defense mode. Before answering her, various questions ran through my head. "Why was she asking me this" "Do I look fat?" "Am I going to be rejected?" And while pondering, I noticed that I had started to suck in my stomach and push out my chest as if to prove her wrong. But looking down and eventually, in the mirror, I did see a small area of fat around my waist. In no way would I qualify for obese, and even saying I was fat would be a struggle. But there was now something extra to squeeze. So what caused me to go into a panic when asked about my weight?

Immediately after our exchange, I found myself questioning my diet. Was this the time to go vegan? Was it the several beers I had two weekends ago? Was I not spending enough time at the gym? Ridiculously, in response to her question, I actually increased my time at the gym. I went from spending one hour at the time, to two. And with each lift, pull and stretch I performed I was determined to prove her wrong.

The last culprit for any weight gain had to be my HIV medication. Perhaps it was some new side effect as some are known to produce belly fat. No matter what it was I simply had to find out.

As a gay man, hearing that you have put on any pounds, even one, creates terror. We are constantly reminded by magazines, television, and even gay porn, that you are only visible if you have abs and a small waist. It's a sad fact that body image plays so much into our lives. I learned early that your looks weighed heavily into how people respond to you, are attracted to you or even willing to date you. And if you fall outside that body structure, you are invisible, forced to choose another sub-categories of identity. Although I consider Bears to be sexy, as a young gay man I wasn't willing to join that group or any sub-grouping.

As a young man, I struggled with trying to attain the body type that would gain me entry. Ironically when I was younger I had the opposite problem of weight gain—I was a skinny kid. I mean "you can almost see my bones" skinny. I felt so self-conscious about being thin that I would do crazy things like wear two pairs of pants, even in the summer. I would drink crates of Ensure and eat as much pasta as I could. I simply wasn't happy in the skin I was in. It was my self-conscious which then led to my low self-esteem. A view of self in which I was never happy.

As I grew older I started to learn about Body Dysmorphic Disorder, a condition that refers to one's preoccupation with a perceived defect or flaw with his or her physical appearance. When I read about the symptoms I knew they were talking about me. I was the one always checking the mirror to make sure I looked alright, even if I just checked myself out a few minutes ago. I was always the one seeking reassurance from others that I was good-looking. As a gay youth, trying to understand my sexual identity meant sleeping with anyone who considered me "hot" as they also provided me with that instant reassurance even if it was to have sex with me. And although I currently workout to strike back at my anxiety, back then it was not for my own benefit but to fit in as I navigated my gay life.

It didn't help that as a young person living with HIV, I encountered plenty of rejection. In my head, I felt if I looked like I was "hot" they may reject me because of my status but have a hard time rejecting me for my looks.

Fast forward thirty something years, and once again I was face to face again with my body discomfort. As I was pounding away at the gym about to head into my second hour, I looked in the mirror and asked myself what was I doing? What happened to the affirmations I gave my own self, and what had happened that I would allow a simple observation turn my life in the opposite direction. And if I had gained some weight, so what?

It wasn't only until I stripped away my current fears that I realized I had a fear of rejection. I feard that if I looked a certain way, I would not be welcomed. This rejection came from a history of being sexually abused and then dealing with my HIV status. And my 'AHA' moment was now that I knew what drove my fear, I now knew how to gain control again of my life.

And that control came with reflecting on the self-love I gave myself and the power to let myself do the rejecting. Rejecting those who didn't accept me for who I am, and that included every extra inch of me. A declaration I once again made to myself that my life would no longer be about trying to fit in or fit some abstract ideal of what beauty is. But an agreement to myself to not place myself in a position where my happiness is dependent on someone's approval.

Am I gaining weight?

Maybe. But if so now I have more of myself to embrace, and I'm loving it!

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