Laughing at My Status

Finding humor can help you live with HIV.

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I was once asked to help friends move to their new apartment. I'm not a big fan of lifting boxes and trudging them to a truck only to take them out and trudge them into a new residence. So during those moments when I was asked I would tell them, "I wished I could, but my HIV is acting up." We would all laugh knowing it was my cue that I was not interested. Yet we found humor in the exchange. They say that laughter is the best medicine, and although having HIV is no joke, incorporating laughter into my life has contributed positively to my health.

Ironically, if someone had told me to simply laugh when I was initially diagnosed, I would not have reacted too favorably. In fact, there would be some colorful words thrown their way. During my early diagnosis, I believed that I had lost the ability to even smile as crying was the only way I could react to my news. The benefit of being a long-time survivor is that you start to see the humor in not only status but also life. You learn to stop reacting to the small things and appreciate the big picture. A picture that reminds you that, although you have HIV, you're still alive so how can you make the best of my situation.

There's even research that backs up the healing effect of laughter. Most studies agree that laughter decreases stress hormones and increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies, thus improving your resistance to disease. A good laugh triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain.

I'm a big believer in this as the comedian side of me comes out in those moments when I know I'm about to be pricked by a needle for my blood draw or any other painful episode of my life. I don't make the claim that I don't feel pain but by finding humor in that moment, my perceived pain levels are reduced and my perception that I can cope increases. Laughter by itself isn't the solution, but it can help a person overcome discomfort.

Laughter contributes to my being in a more positive mood. In fact, I seek out those who have the ability to make me smile. Being around positive people allows me the ability to get caught up in their good mood as laughter is also contagious. When I'm feeling down or having a depressed day, the last thing I need to do is be around negative people. This is why I was never good in some HIV support groups. It's a great place to process what it means to live with HIV, especially with those newly diagnosed, but after a while, the negativity of some group members and their situation

starts to drag your spirit down. Especially when you realize they're not trying to better their situation but seem to find comfort in the negativity of their lives.

With the ability to laugh and embrace humor I've seen my stress levels decrease and my tolerance levels more accepting. That's a great benefit for me, knowing I once used to walk around with anger. In fact, you could say anger was my new best friend and it followed me—or rather, I let it lead me. And allowing anger to guide you may seem like a good defense when in actuality it contributes negatively to one's overall health. By allowing myself to laugh and even smile, I allowed myself the ability to accept my situations and become a more likable person. Once I removed the anger, more people came into my life as my anger projected an unapproachable person.

Finally, the introduction of laughter can boost one's resilience. Resilience is the ability to see failure as a natural progression to success rather than as a negative outcome. This was important to me as I learned that, although I couldn't change my HIV status, I was more of a winner if I didn't let it change me. And being an unhappy, miserable person is not who I was meant to be. So with my new resiliency, I accepted my faults and instead of asking myself, "Why me? Why did I get HIV?" I learned to see the positive side of my situation and inserted a purpose for my status, which is to help those living with HIV so they cannot allow the disease to define their existence.

So where can people find laughter? Do you buy it in the store or download it as an app? Where can someone begin? If you look around there are many places you can find humor. Television is the most natural place, but if we broaden our imagination and look deeper, we can find laughter in reading funny books, spending more time with friends who make us laugh and sometimes just finding humor in our day to day activities. And of course, this doesn't mean to laugh at people but laugh with them.

Thank god for laughter as I don't know what kind of person I would be without it. It also makes it so much easier to describe dates that don't go well. Instead of giving someone a long drawn out story of what went wrong with a date, I can simply say, "Yeah they were interesting as a person but when it came down to sex, their penis was no bigger than an Atripla"

Get it? Funny right? Oh go get a funny bone!

And watch your life glow!

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