Where is the Line?

June 26, 2011 By Anonymous

Almost exactly one year ago today I was diagnosed with HIV. As the one year anniversary of my diagnosis quickly approaches, I find myself struggling with knowing when to live without letting my diagnosis alter my decisions and when to acknowledge the reality that being HIV positive *does* effect my life. I don't want HIV to be a crutch that I have to drag along, stopping me from running at full speed. But I also believe we all sometimes need to slow down in order to deal with the emotional reality of being diagnosed and the physical complications HIV sometimes brings. So, where do you draw the line between those two conflicting realities? Do I take the advice of a wise, long-time survivor who advocates for "healthy denial," or do I give myself a lot of space and time to feel, to cry, and to take advantage of all the support services I can find?

This week these questions came to a head when I was offered a prestigious, highly sought-after writing position at my school, and had a really difficult time deciding whether or not to accept it. My classmates and colleagues told me I was crazy to even consider declining the position; I would be "shutting doors" on my own career. But my classmates don't know about my status. Maybe if they did they wouldn't think I was so crazy after all. This particular position would have to be squeezed into my already jam-packed schedule, would cause additional stress, and would undoubtedly lead to less self-care.

I was conflicted. I cancelled my Saturday night plans and sat alone in my apartment thinking, writing, talking to people whose opinions I trust, and making lists of the pros and cons. But no matter how many pros and how many cons, the same questions kept creeping back into my mind: Would I accept this position if I was never diagnosed with HIV? Is it even fair to ask myself that question at all? What's the line between not letting HIV control my life, and recognizing the reality of the challenges it brings?

After A LOT of thought, I started to realize that even though I don't spend a lot of time discussing it, my status is a big part of my life now, and I can't ever really know what I would or would not do if I was never diagnosed. The truth is, I'm HIV positive now, and my health needs to be a bigger priority than it was before my diagnosis.

I realize also that I'm not the same person I was a year ago. I'm stronger. I have a deeper appreciation for self-care, self-worth and self-protection. So, why do I keep trying to mentally return to the 'self' I was before my diagnosis? The 'self' I am now is doing pretty great, HIV and all. But when it comes to big decisions that will effect my stress level, my time, and my future, my mind wanders back to unanswerable questions of "should I" because I have HIV, and "would I" if I didn't have HIV.

I guess, as most things in life, the answer lies in the abstract. There is no clear line to be

drawn. There is no right answer. There must be a happy medium somewhere between “healthy denial” and declining prestigious positions just because I’m HIV positive. The hard part is finding it…

So, in my attempt to find my own happy medium, I accepted the position, but on a condition. I promised myself that I would quit if it proves to be unmanageable and if my mental or physical health is suffering. A good friend reminded me that after getting through all the challenges of this last year, making a decision to leave a position for the benefit of my mental or physical health probably won’t seem like such a big deal. I can and will face the challenge of a demanding schedule, and if I have to back out because I need to prioritize my health, then I will face that challenge as well.

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