

How Does it Feel?

8 reasons why asking yourself this question may MAKE YOU HEALTHIER

Larry's Story For over a year I'd been counselling Larry about his problems relating to being HIV positive, trying to get him to realize that if he didn't start to deal with all his worries and fears, and his deep secrets and stuffed-down feelings, he wasn't ever going to regain his physical health (medically), no matter how many pills he took.

Then one day, he announced, "Guess what I just realized? Every time I have a thought, there's a feeling attached!" It was a casual statement, yet it marked a major turning point for Larry's health because it indicated that he was beginning to understand that his mind and body are deeply interconnected. He had started to realize that his physical (medical) condition was always going to be affected by his emotions and thoughts—no matter how much he tried to avoid them. Once Larry knew he couldn't become physically healthier without first resolving all the other issues that were bothering him, he became much more willing to explore these problems in our counselling sessions. A few months later, Larry was not only healthier and happier but he no longer needed me as his counsellor because he'd learned how to take care of himself without my help.

Emotional Healing Over the years I've learned from my clients and friends with HIV/AIDS that how people feel about having HIV influences not only their attitudes but also how they take care of their bodies (or decide if they want to). Usually people with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) are directed to pay attention mainly to the medical aspects of their treatment, as if maintaining their body's physical health is their sole responsibility. Rarely are they given as much preparation for encountering, understanding or coping with all the inner feelings, complex thoughts and spiritual concerns that arise from an HIV positive diagnosis.

Yet frequently the biggest problem for PHAs is not so much the specific medical aspects of HIV, but rather *what HIV means inside their heart, mind and spirit*. These things deeply affect the quality and direction of each person's journey with HIV.

Having counselled PHAs for over a decade, I've seen proof that when people take better care of themselves emotionally, mentally and spiritually, they find that their lives become better balanced overall. Their body's physical health usually improves as a result (because it's

by Judy Weiser

directly connected to these other parts of themselves). This balance is important to overall health, in that a person cannot be truly physically healthy while emotionally distressed, spiritually troubled or mentally upset.

People can become physically healthier by learning how to resolve any "unfinished" emotional, interpersonal, family or spiritual difficulties. Sometimes they can do this on their own or by talking with friends or peer counsellors, while other times they might need the help of a professional therapist. Regardless of who helps you, one thing is clear: The more you can resolve your worries, fears and other troubles—and permit yourself to actually *feel* your feelings (and deal constructively with the consequences of doing this)—the more energy will automatically become freed up for improving your physical health. Each and every "bottled-up" feeling you have requires some energy to keep it in its "hiding place." Once that energy is released as you work through your issues, you usually feel lighter and less depressed. You'll also have more energy available for staying healthier—and, most importantly, *wanting* to.

Dealing with all the other-than-medical aspects of life with HIV will help you cope better and stay healthier longer—even though there's no cure for HIV, you *can* find some healing in the meantime. As a result, you can begin to take back your own life to live (and love!) as fully as possible. It's all a matter of balance.

Here is a list of things that will help you get started on your healing journey with HIV. (Notice that none of these has to do with taking medications!)

1 Take more personal responsibility regarding your own medical care.

By becoming better informed about HIV, treatment options and the details of your own particular medical situation, you can become your doctor's partner in deciding what's best for you. It's your responsibility to keep your body as healthy as possible, not your doctor's!

There are many things you can do for your body to improve its medical condition, such as reducing stress (relax through yoga or meditation, exercise, enjoy activities not related to HIV). Your body could also probably use some attention to what's being put into it (or not!), so perhaps it might be useful to consult a nutritionist or dietitian to see if there's any room for improvement.

Don't deliver yourself to your doctor like a blank slate—arrive at appointments with knowledge, questions and the attitude that you deserve to have your questions answered. After all, it's *your* body that you and your doctor are working together to heal!

2 Explore (and clear) emotionally complex issues that are living deep inside you.

Think of all the things you'd like to change but can't, all the things you'd like to tell somebody but are afraid to, all the secrets you're worried someone will discover, all the addictions you're going to deal with "someday," all the "what if's" and "I shouldn't have's"—the things that keep you from sleeping well or having fun.

Issues like these are complex, and it takes a lot of energy to ignore them or keep them buried. Few people can figure them out by themselves. That's why there are counsellors to help you review your life and clarify what you want to change or improve. In the process, you'll likely encounter moments when you feel overwhelmed, depressed or powerless, but by talking about these things you can recognize their effects on you and learn how to cope better with such feelings.

Think of everything that's troubling you right now, and imagine for a moment that these issues have been resolved. Ahhh, that would be a big sigh of relief, wouldn't it? So, what's stopping you from getting started on this journey? Your troubles are already inside you, bothering you whether or not you face them. By beginning to confront them (in a safe environment where someone can help you explore and resolve them), at least you have a good chance of removing their power over you. Your heart will feel a lot lighter as a result.

3 Encounter (and experience) negative feelings rather than avoiding, denying or numbing them chemically.

It's only natural that when we're hurt we try to protect ourselves. We sometimes try to lessen the pain in a number of ways (by getting revenge, ignoring it, numbing it with recreational or street drugs, or giving up and being depressed so we don't feel anything anymore), but none of these things actually takes the pain away. It usually just buries itself deeper under many layers of protection, sometimes to the point where we don't even realize it's still there.

In order to heal these hurts, they have to be encountered or we won't be able to get rid of them. When things are deeply buried, they have a bad habit of popping up when least expected. When that happens, they can suddenly arise all at once, and this can be frightening.

Living in fear of experiencing your feelings means they still actually run your life because trying to avoid their effects defines how you live. If "bumpy" feelings don't get resolved, they'll come back to haunt you—either directly, by erupting, or indirectly, by making you depressed or physically sick (or worse).

Feelings and thoughts are alive (like the air that surrounds and sustains us) even if they can't be seen. Feelings are busy "doing their thing" inside us, whether or not we're aware of them. So when times get bumpy and



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emotions get stirred up, our first tendency is often to try to control them, like putting a lid on a boiling pot. It's easy to fool ourselves with the belief that as long as the lid is shut tight, the feelings tumbling around inside us will stay contained and under control and won't erupt unexpectedly to terrify and overwhelm us.

But that bubbling emotional "pot on the stove" just gets more and more pressured until the lid finally blows off. This is where there's danger of people becoming violent, hurting others or themselves. If people had ways to safely "let off steam" about what was bothering them before it literally made them sick, they could better protect themselves from the harmful effects of having to keep those things hidden inside themselves. Counselling helps people find ways to acknowledge feelings and deal with them constructively in small, manageable amounts so they don't suddenly explode uncontrollably.

Many people walk around with their feelings stuffed so far down inside themselves that they're not even aware they have any feelings—until perhaps bumping into them with shocked surprise when drunk or high or when tragedy hits (such as losing a loved one or a job, or finding out they have HIV). Avoiding feelings gives them even more power. When people feel they can't fix their problems by themselves, this helplessness feeds their depression. People who are depressed a lot get sick easier! If you believe you're going to get sick and die, and there's nothing you can do about it, you likely will.

But when you risk exploring what's deep inside and begin to experience your feelings rather than avoid them, a lot of personal power comes back and life begins to have vibrancy and hope again. Caring about yourself is the first step, and you can't do that when you won't let yourself feel anything. When you become more comfortable with actually *feeling* your feelings, your healing has begun.

4 Strengthen your personal coping skills

so that small crises don't get bigger than they need to.

Although you may not be able to do much about the circumstances of your life, you *can* do something about how you react to them. When you cope better, your whole attitude improves and your medical condition takes on less of a crisis atmosphere. Learning how to cope better with your problems helps ease their negative effects on you and leaves room to enjoy the simple pleasures of daily life. Living in the moment becomes richer once you realize that "now" is really all that anyone truly has.

Yes, HIV may kill you, but then again, it may not! Perhaps this uncertainty means it's time to get on with your life rather than being hesitant about it, because it may not end like you expect. Wouldn't you hate to get all

the way to your senior years never having lived in the first place because you weren't able to see beyond your diagnosis?

5 Separate your illness from your self (and your self from its stigma!).

You may have HIV, but it doesn't have to "have" you. HIV is not who you *are*; you are much *more* than HIV. It's a virus, a medical condition—nothing less, nothing more. Self-hatred or internalized homophobia do not have to automatically accompany having HIV.

If you think of yourself as tainted or cursed by HIV, that you're somehow less of a person because of it, then the virus wins—and thus you're "dead" anyway, even though your body is still alive. You must be able to separate your own life from that of the virus, so that reducing it inside you doesn't also reduce your self in the process. Here's the formula: "You minus HIV equals *what?*"

6 Develop a support network where it's safe to ask for, and receive, emotional support.

It's important to let others give you emotional support. Having a support network that you're willing to nurture and maintain becomes a reciprocal arrangement you can count on. You *will* need help occasionally—we all do. The trick is to find this without having to give up your self-respect in the process. Knowing you're willing to offer emotional support in return makes it easier to accept it from others. When you let others begin to care about you, you usually find yourself starting to care more about yourself.

7 Become more of an activist (at least personally, if not politically).

There's an old Quaker term called "bearing witness." It means that if you see or know of something wrong happening, even if you can't stop it, at least you can make sure it's known that you've witnessed it so it doesn't pass unnoticed with invisible consequences. Bearing witness can be very empowering because it helps people escape from being powerless victims.


HIV/AIDS *is* political, and activism at *any* level can be helpful—even just refusing to view HIV as a death sentence is a personal-political action! Activism isn't just a powerful political tool at community levels, it's also individually empowering and health-enhancing in its ability to effect change inside the person who makes a stand—even through simple, quiet actions like volunteer work or writing a letter of support. Activism goes hand in hand with education and accessibility and assisting those with less power—and the result is that you yourself grow in the process.

8 Find a way to have more "AIDS-free downtime."

Everybody needs time in their life "to breathe," time when HIV isn't in your face 24/7, when who you are inside yourself is more important than your relationship with the virus. Even though it never goes away, HIV *can* be put aside for a while so you can have a rest from it. It may well be part of your life but it doesn't define your life as a whole and therefore should not be allowed to control it (see #5).

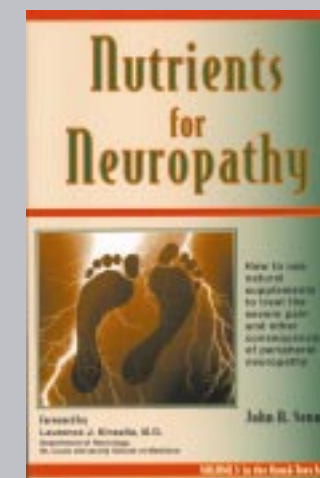
Instead of HIV always riding around on your shoulder no matter where you go, try to rebalance your life better by finding a way to move HIV to a parking space nearby—where you can reclaim it when you need to, but where it can otherwise sit there gathering dust and not drive you to crazy places. Usually when you're having fun, the HIV somehow isn't "there" so much. This sort of "AIDS-away time" helps people move HIV a little further away from their mind (and heart), much like the way that being on holiday makes work problems fade into the background.

Of course, this list can't be done all at once, but each point is a step forward, no matter how slowly it is begun. If you can simply begin to find more reasons to want to live another day or week—something that gives your life a bit more meaning and purpose, that makes your feelings more worth exploring and encountering—then you've begun the path of healing inside your heart and spirit. When you have a reason to live, and begin to more fully live the emotional parts of your life, you'll be in better balance overall. Your physical health will have a better chance at improving and hopefully will carry you long enough until the cure is found (or until you die of old age).

People can move from being passive victims to being active participants in their own lives, thereby gaining more control over what's being done to their body. People can begin to realize that what they put into their mind and heart is at least as important as the medications and nutrients they put into their mouth. All of us are eventually going to die; nobody gets out of here alive. But we can try to live as fully as possible in the meantime—because the more we live, the less we die while we're still alive. HIV can be made to take a backseat rather than running your life. As the poet James Baldwin wrote: "If you don't live the only life you have, you won't live some other life; you won't live life at all!" 


Judy Weiser is a psychologist, art therapist, consultant and trainer specializing in helping PHAs, especially street-involved youth and adults. She teaches workshops at conferences and for ASOs in both Aboriginal and non-Native communities. Director of the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver, she trains counsellors to use clients' personal and family snapshots to help them understand and express their feelings.

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Nutrients for Neuropathy
by John A. Senneff
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NUTRIENTS FOR NEUROPATHY

FOR PEOPLE WITH HIV/AIDS LIVING ON PINS AND NEEDLES, this research-crammed guide to natural supplements for peripheral neuropathy (PN) should be the perfect cushion. A sequel to Senneff's *Numb Toes and Aching Soles* and *Numb Toes and Other Woes* (both reviewed in previous issues of *The Positive Side*), this edition lacks HIV-specific chapters (though Senneff does cite studies on how nutritional supplements affect PHAs). And though you also won't find info on how supplements interact with HIV meds, Senneff, a PN'er himself, knows the terrain. (Be sure to tell your doctor about any supplements you plan to take.) The reader-friendly descriptions of antioxidants, minerals and herbs, and how they strengthen nerve function, should soothe just about everyone. 

—Rebecca Minnich

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