

Ron: Being pro-active

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"I realised very early on that if I was going to be one of the lucky ones, that it was going to be of my own making. I took a proactive approach and learned as much as I could about the [virus](#) [1]A small infective organism which is incapable of reproducing outside a host cell.."

Ron was diagnosed with HIV back in the early days of the epidemic. He adopted a different approach to many others. 'There was a stick your head in the sand attitude at the time. It seemed unacceptable to me and I just started my own personal research.'

'I realised very early on that if I was going to be one of the lucky ones, that it was going to be of my own making.'

'I took a proactive approach. I learned as much as I could about the virus. Where there were no real strategies available at the time, I developed some of my own from a holistic model. I learned about nutrition, anatomy, physiology, and virology and anything that had some kind of a healing component to it.'

Part of Ron's determination was because there was little treatment available. 'There was only AZT mono-therapy. I didn't respond well to that at all. So I started seeing a naturopath, taking vitamin supplements and streamlining my diet. I learned as much as I could about the human body and became a personal fitness trainer. It all worked hand in hand.'

He also had to face personal issues including becoming infected with HIV at the age of 19. 'I tested positive after having sex with one guy. It was a very unfortunate thing for me. A lot of issues arose from that. Learning to take responsibility from the very beginning and saying "I did know better, I did put myself in that situation, and I am not necessarily to blame but this is my responsibility now." I think it was very empowering for me, to be able to actually discern between blame and responsibility.'

Ron also found his HIV diagnosis precipitated a mental health problem. 'HIV brought it to a head and I overcame a major depressive disorder and I was able to work through that by a combination of treatment as well as psychotherapy.'

Now Ron describes having heightened self-awareness. 'I pay more attention to my body than ever before. Having 20 years of experience, I understand the nuances better. I know when I'm pushing myself too much and when my body's run down. I know when it's more mental or physical. I'm able to discern between what I'm making up and what's real. My peer network helps me with that. And bouncing those things off of my friends who are also HIV positive.'

Ron is also fortunate to have a wonderful relationship. 'I have got the most perfect partner I could possibly have. We can talk about anything, and we do. With him I very much feel that as long as one of us is doing well, and as long as one of us is in a good position and has the capacity to make decisions, we're doing alright.'

These days Ron maintains his health by following routines. 'My main exercise now is to do the walk from Bondi to Bronte 4 times a week. It takes about 45 minutes, its wonderful as it is paved and beside the ocean.'

'Half the time I walk alone and the other half with my partner. When I am alone I listen to my MP3, usually uplifting music. It depends on my needs at the time, if I need quiet then I don't ask my partner to come along.'

'I follow that up at home with yoga sun salutations and exercise ball work for core stability. It's also a way of getting some quiet meditative time in my exercise program.'

'Because I live and work in a world of HIV, my mind is constantly running on about programs and how to do things better. Taking the walk is an opportunity to shut down and focus on myself.'

Ron works in ACON's Healthy Life +program, which is based at the Sydney Positive Living Centre. He has noticed the relationship between physical and mental health with people involved in the program. 'With regular exercise

people feel improvements in mental health and well-being and describe an increase in confidence and resilience.’

Sometimes the benefits of keeping fit are most apparent when they are reduced. ‘If I take a break, it takes me about a week to get back into it. And I can feel the difference. My capacities diminish, I feel less tolerant and have less stamina. I notice it especially in my relationship with my partner. My tolerance diminishes and I become short and sharp. And he will tell me “you need to take a walk” and I listen when he says that.’

When it comes to his own fitness program, Ron has different motivations now. ‘I still go to the gym and lift weights, but it’s no longer my priority. I have reframed it as I have got older and I am more focused on body movement. It’s about giving my body what it wants, not taking from it what I want. When I say ‘body’ I am talking about the holistic perspective – the body, mind and soul and understanding all of that. It’s about bringing my mind and body to rest.’

Reflecting over the years Ron says, ‘One of the hardest things was to set boundaries for my health care and health management. Without having to disclose my status, especially early on, it was hard to say, “no I can’t do this, that or the other, because I just can’t, because it’s not good for me.” It took ten years before I was able to really stand behind my ‘yes’s’ and my ‘no’s’. Right or wrong, this is what my body needs’.

After living with HIV for more than 20 years Ron seems to have found his balance. His exercise regime, his outlook on life and the ways in which he chooses to relax all seem to enhance his overall well-being. HIV is a relatively new virus. Living with HIV for 20 years is new territory. We know that ageing naturally increases the risks of cardiovascular disease. However, there is also some evidence to suggest that HIV – as well as the treatments that are used to treat HIV – can contribute to cardiovascular disease. Regular exercise and relaxation can contribute towards reducing cardiovascular problems regardless of the underlying issue.

‘Generally speaking, I have learnt and continue to redefine “balance” in my life. Prior to highly active [antiretroviral](#) [2]A medication or other substance which is active against retroviruses such as HIV. therapy ([HAART](#) [3]Highly Active AntiRetroviral Therapy ??? aggressive treatment of HIV infection using several different drugs together.), I adopted a very strict, all-or-nothing, approach to healthy living. Twenty years into it I recognise that not just my virus has aged, but so too has my body – so I do my best to listen to what it needs. At this point, I do my best to include various forms of exercise in moderation, paying attention to my body as well as other aspects of my life that will require my energy, like my work. I suppose it’s fair to say that my need for relaxation and having a bit of “reflection” time has become a vital part of establishing that balance.’

Managing HIV. It’s about [balance](#) [4].

- [living with HIV](#)
- [exercise](#)
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Links:

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/125>

[2] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/122>

[3] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/96>

[4] <http://www.napwa.org.au/hivbalance>