

Tobin: Making a sea change

Created 22 Jul 2008 - 12:04pm

'Ever since I seroconverted, I've had this attitude that HIV will fit my agenda, not make it the centre of my life. That might sound hypocritical because I do work in the HIV area, but I enjoy and learn from that. It's a big part of my life but I don't revolve around it. I try and make it revolve around me.'

'A lot of friends were very encouraging about the move. A small proportion of people were like, "Oh you won't last. How could you – Mr. Socialite – go somewhere remote?" My mum was always very supportive. She's a total rock in my life.'

The move was something Tobin felt driven to do. He knew he'd enjoy nature. 'I get a huge sense of relaxation. It diverts my mind, almost like meditating. Nature seems to answer your questions. It's ever changing so it's really everything that TV wishes it could be. It's really good for my emotional wellbeing and stability. I live by the beach. The sound of the ocean is really meditative. For someone with a fast active mind it's like an enforced form of meditation.'

The move has helped Tobin reduce his stress levels, and he has more time to get to the beach and exercise. 'It's a major change to live by myself with a focused routine. I'm sleeping more, getting up early, buying lots of lovely local fresh fruit and vegetables, planning my week's eating. My diet's improved out of sight because I'm looking after myself.'

Adjusting to life outside a city wasn't easy at first 'I didn't move away to socialise. But I wasn't prepared for being desperate for people. Whether intimate sexual contact, or friends and family, I miss them. For a period I would go to a local pub and drink and gamble just to get out of the house. There are some hidden nasty bits living in a rural area.'

Tobin met a guy from the local footy team at the pub. 'I asked what would they think of a HIV- positive poofter on the team. He said "they don't need to know." So football was one thing I did to change some bad habits, to get out of my comfort zone, force myself to meet people I mightn't feel comfortable with and challenge some really big things. It was about being with men in a situation that some queens see as some camp fantasy, but to treat it as friendship. It was a big experiment. It worked really well. I got welcomed into the team and my self-image went up enormously. Having these blokes know who I am, what I do, and accept me for it made me realise that a lot of my paranoia is basically just that.'

Perhaps a little surprisingly, football became an important part of staying fit. 'My fitness level went up, and in turn that increased my whole wellbeing. I've always been physical. I studied dance. I've always stretched and done yoga and things like Tai Chi and Kung Fu. I've always felt very connected to my body and felt that these were important things for both my physical and emotional well-being.'

'I stretch at least twice a week. It's essential, I seem to hold a lot of stress in my body. It's like a panacea that deals with almost everything. I find meditating quite difficult because I'm so neurotic. But a stretch routine has a meditative quality. I forget about what's on my mind.'

Tobin incorporates some yoga into his stretch routines. 'The yoga positions are really calming. If I don't stretch, the energy snowballs negatively. If I get a sore back, peripheral neuropathy or little treatments side effects, stretching minimises them dramatically.'

'A lot of HIV-positive people smoke cigarettes and pot, and drink. There seems to be more need and reasons to nullify things that seem overwhelming. Sometimes, no matter how stable you are, you need to just drown it out.'

'I think being homosexual puts us on the outer edge with subconscious negative thoughts in our minds. Then HIV multiplies that isolation and loneliness. For people who are attempting to embark on relationships amidst all this stigma and discrimination and assumptions about positive people – the whole notion of people feeling really toxic and unlovable. This is a source of a lot of problems.'

'Tell them you're positive and they won't want to touch you. But they will go off and fuck someone if nothing is mentioned. Some- times having to reconcile all that shit makes me really angry. I'd like to just slap some queens in town.'

Part of Tobin's work involves running forums that deal with some of these issues. 'All these brave positive people inspire me and some find me brave and have gratitude that I do this work.'

For people who are considering making changes in their lives, Tobin has some advice, 'The most important thing is don't set your goal too high. Say if you want to give up smoking. Try it, but if you fall off the wagon, don't make that a reason to start smoking hard again. Or with exercising, start really slowly and don't pressure yourself to try to get stuck into a huge regime quickly because often you get overwhelmed by it. Allow your body to adjust. Especially if you want to lose weight, it can seem overwhelming when you first start. Take it slowly and allow yourself to fall off from time to time without punishing yourself. Look at the bigger longer-term picture. That goes for every change.'

Ian Coutts, a health coach who worked in the Living Positively project at the Melbourne Positive Living Centre in 2006 would agree that lapses while pursuing a goal are normal. Ian says that many people he has seen in the project have experienced this situation. 'There can be a number of factors that can cause a loss of momentum, like fluctuating health, stressful life events and also conflicting priorities. Setbacks are a part of life and it is no use to beat yourself up about them. I feel it is much more productive to be forward looking and focus on what can be achieved in the future. I believe that change is a learning process and that each attempt is a step on the path to achieving your goals.' In situations like these, Ian talks with his clients and reviews why they may feel they are losing momentum, helps them to set new goals if required and also to develop new strategies and plans. 'I remind people of what their initial goal was and the strength of their desire to achieve it. Then we set new goals if required and develop new strategies and plans.'

Sometimes Tobin misses the support of his many HIV-positive friends in the city, but overall the life changes he has put in place are now yielding other benefits. 'I'm a lot calmer, healthier, and less stressed. I make more informed rational decisions about life. There's more time. I need less to feel happy. I get fewer physical ailments now, so HIV is less in my life.'

Managing HIV. It's about [balance](#) [1].

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Links:

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