

All stressed out and nowhere to go? Take a chill.

Long thought to court illness, stress appears to be an ally of HIV in the virus' attack on the immune system. According to a recent study, HIV appears to multiply faster in people who handle stress poorly. UCLA researchers assessed the stress levels of 13 men with HIV before they were given anti-HIV treatment. In the PHAs who remained calmest after being put through stress-inducing mental exercises, viral levels fell much more after beginning medication than they did in those most stressed. Those who kept their cool also had many more CD4 cells. The study's lead author fingered the hormone norepinephrine, released by stress, as the likely culprit that helps HIV bind better to cells and so encourages the virus to reproduce faster.

So stay calm. But if you're not a Buddha, you may find serenity easier said than done — especially because HIV can sometimes be the biggest stressor of all. **Chatty CATIE asked five PHAs for some advice on how to deal.**



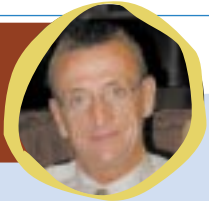
Chantale Perron, 34
Info-treatment counsellor at CPAVIH. Diagnosed with HIV: 1992.
Viral load: undetectable. CD4 count: 860. Montreal, Quebec

Here are the different activities I do, depending on the situation that stresses me:

- Feel free** I like to put on cozy clothes (you just don't feel the same in a suit or high heels as you do in your old sweat shirt, jogging pants and running shoes). This is also a way to cut the day between work and home.
- Laugh** I never watch drama on TV. Laughing is a good complementary treatment, so I try to watch funny movies or sitcoms.
- Tenderness or affection** If you have a lover or friend or family, use them. Sometimes just sitting next to somebody I love or having somebody play with my hair does a lot more for me than having sex.
- Make love, have sex!** When you are doing it, you can't think about your deadlines or bills at the same time (well, you're not supposed to).
- Hot bath and aromatherapy** I like to buy fruit- or flower-scented oils for my bath and I stay there for half an hour with a book or tabloids.
- Massage** It's a gift I can afford only once in a while, but I never regret it. Sometimes students in massotherapy school need volunteers because they have to practice a certain number of hours before getting their diploma. I get a lot of free massages this way!
- Herbal tea** Just taking the time to drink it and to feel the warmth in my hands is relaxing.

Bob Mills, 48

Medically retired school teacher, AIDS treatment activist. Diagnosed with HIV: 1989.
Viral load: 80,000. CD4 count: 110.
Edmonton, Alberta



Stress comes in many ways and I deal with it differently depending on the kind of stress I have. The very first thing I do when I feel stress is try to *determine the cause*. If it's my lack of health, the best way for me to reduce that stress is to find out what's going on; I need to fill in all the blanks. When I was first diagnosed, I was absolutely frightened because I didn't have enough knowledge to make intelligent decisions about what I needed to do next. So I had to *learn as much as I could* about my illness and all my options. My health is my greatest stress, but the more I know, the less stressed I feel about it.

Stress related to my life, as opposed to my illness, is much different. This kind of stress — workload, relationships, the leaky roof — is usually more within my control. These are not life and death situations. (The most important thing in life is health; all the rest is immaterial, as long as it's not life-threatening.) I deal with life-related stress by

making a conscious effort to procrastinate. This morning I had a bunch of e-mails to answer and I was feeling stressed about it, so I showered, shaved and *took the dogs for a walk*. I needed to take this 40 minutes out of my life. However, at other times I don't procrastinate. Sometimes I know there's no point in going to bed and leaving whatever is stressing me until tomorrow because I won't be able to sleep. *If I don't sleep, I have more stress* in the morning. Basically, I make choices that are going to minimize long-term stress — short-term pain for long-term gain, a horrible cliché but I can't think of anything better.

If I'm emotionally upset, I sit on the couch with my dogs. They put their heads on my lap and look at me until their eyes get heavy and they doze off. *I can feel their little hearts beating*. Their company is an incredible stress reliever.





Alex Archie, 35

Research coordinator at

Healing Our Spirit.

Diagnosed with HIV: 1990.

Viral load: 16,000.

CD4 count: 90. *Vancouver, BC*

The main way I deal with stress is with *support* of people in my life. *I talk to my doctor* a lot.

He's an HIV specialist with an outlook on living with HIV that I haven't experienced with many doctors. Once when I was going through a hard time with my treatment, he asked me, "What do you want to live for?" I didn't answer right away because it was a hard question for me. I eventually told him I wasn't sure what I wanted to live for, but I knew I didn't want to live the way my life was going at the time — I'd been giving myself away to others more than I was *nurturing myself*. His question helped me to finally figure out what people meant when they said to take care of myself.

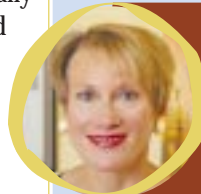
I maintain friendships with people who have a good understanding of living with HIV. My *friends* are always around when I need them and are very supportive of me and my work. So is my *family*. I came out to them first about being 2-Spirited, and after testing positive I came out to them about that. They know it's not always easy. Sometimes I put on a facade for them, in regards to how I'm doing and how much stress I'm under because I try not to stress other people out with my stresses. I like to think of this as a coping mechanism. Sometimes the *avoidance of certain subjects* is easier on me. Besides, they know I'll tell them if something's really not right.

Watching Jeopardy reduces my stress because I know there are people out there who are a little stupider than me. I also write poetry and I'm teaching myself how to *play guitar*.

Smudging with sage in my home helps clean my mind and spirit and

carries my prayers to grandmothers, grandfathers and the Great Spirit. It allows me peace within my thoughts and actions. Smudging is a great reminder that my life is about me and myself more so than anybody else in the world.

Finally, I try not to concentrate too much on the fact that I'm HIV positive. *Taking my meds* is one of those points during my day that reminds me, but it also grounds me.



Louise Binder, 52

Chair of Voices of Positive

Women, chair of the Canadian

Treatment Advocates Council,

co-chair Ministerial Council on

HIV/AIDS. Diagnosed with HIV:

1994. *Viral load: undetectable.*

CD4 count: 620. *Toronto, Ontario*

The idea of anyone being interested in my stress reduction techniques is hilarious! I started a stress reduction course a few months ago and was so busy that I only made it to the first class. My teacher and I agreed it was not for me. I like to say that *I failed Stress Reduction 101*. So I'm not sure how much credibility I have on this subject.

Having said that, I think being able to *see the humour in life* and not take it all too seriously is a form of stress reduction in itself. As well, it's important to wake up with things in your day that you find fun and that make you feel *mentally and physically well*. I do power-stepping for exercise, which is great stress relief. I've signed up for a writing course and an *opera appreciation* course (for some people that would probably create stress). I find time for my friends and I've taken up cooking. I could actually go on for a while — reading good books, going to movies...



Janet Conners, 45

Semi-retired activist. Diagnosed

with HIV: 1989. *Viral load:*

undetectable. CD4 count: 593.

Hatchet Lake, Nova Scotia

I've had a lot of grief-induced stress, and in the past, I spent a lot of *time alone in my car crying*. I'd be driving, so I guess it wasn't too safe. But in my car, I could be completely alone and nobody could get ahold of me. It was sort of a planned event: There was always music playing; I'd specifically choose music I knew would make me cry, mostly *broken-heart songs*, some Tammy Wynette, Whitney Houston.

That was before I figured out that I could cry in front of other people. Often stress comes because we're carrying this big load that we feel we need to carry ourselves. But I've realized that *we can share this load*. We share almost every other emotion with people — happiness, joy, laughter, anger, frustration — except for crying. There's this idea that you shouldn't cry in public. Once I learned to *cry in front of others*, I was able to express what I was feeling while I was feeling it, without letting it build up to a point where it would become too stressful. *A huge weight was released.*

Today there are two main ways I deal with stress. One, *I talk about it* — with my partner, sister, friends — and try to sort it out. And two, I've moved to the country and we're on a lake, so I go to the most quiet place on our property and just sit and *watch the lake* so my mind can be clear. I still listen to a lot of music, but these days it's *showtunes*. I love Gypsy, especially "Everything's Coming Up Roses."