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Life Goes On (And On)

Gaining wisdom along the hard road

Aaron Hornstein doesn't know everything. Diagnosed with full-blown AIDS in 1995, Aaron was given six months to live. Unable to take AZT, he went home to die. And he did die.

He recalls the day, the white tunnel and the feeling of being someplace very familiar. Aaron's death not only provided him with a vivid image of passing but also sparked life-altering visions about living. The next day, he woke up unable to see or walk, but nevertheless embarking on another chance at life. After being extremely ill for another two years, his condition began to improve.

Not knowing what he could count on in terms of a future, Aaron decided to join a group of survivors whose goal was to climb Mount Rainier, rated the toughest endurance climb in the United States.

In 1999, at a mere 120 pounds, Aaron met a personal trainer at Project Quest who was seeking one person to train for a study. This meeting, which Aaron now characterizes as serendipitous, led him to train for a full six months before attempting the climb. He was one of two people to reach the peak of Mount Rainier, and he's been exercising ever since: "It took about three years to get my leg strength back, and it was hard muscle to build back because of the muscle wasting."

Now up to a built 185 pounds, Aaron says, "My body is totally different than before; my muscles are still trying to catch up." He has been playing softball since 1999 and exercising at Portland's venerable Loprinzi's Gym since 2000. He lifts weights three to five times a week and plays with the Rose City Softball Association's Red Wings during spring season.

"AIDS was a gift...an odd gift that you can't exchange for store credit," he laughs.

He also says that, although he can work his upper body very well, the antiviral meds have caused his internal organs to harden, a phenomenon that his doctors cannot explain. "My middle is stiff, and I have a hard time working abs. I'm achy all of the time." Not missing a beat, he adds, "But life is beautiful every day, even when I'm sick."

As Aaron describes the overarching impact his illness has had on his life, he comments: "I used to be vain. Now I go through life enjoying myself and not really caring about what other people think about me."

Having decided he wants to stay around for a good while longer, he's given up climbing. "It's too risky," he says with a smile.

His "second life," as he calls it, has opened up the possibility of new relationships. He now has his future to think about. Single for three years, he would love to be dating someone special. "The most important thing to me now is that our personalities mesh."

Rarely do you find someone so outgoing and earnest at the gym. Aaron Hornstein might not know everything, but he has the experience of two very different lives to draw upon. His unique perspective, coupled with a brilliant smile and



Dear Ethel
BY MARIA CALLAHAN

remarkable humility, render those around him captivated and inspired. As our interview closes, Aaron shrugs, smiles and lets me in on his secret: "I have the benefit of living every day as if it were my last."

Words of wisdom, indeed.

DEAR ETHEL:

I've just been diagnosed with a progressive chronic illness. I've gone through such a whirlwind of change that I feel like my life is no longer my own. I've been exercising for years, and I consider it my safe haven. I see two doctors, but one of them disagrees with me about my continuing to exercise the way I'd like to. Can I still exercise?

Question your doctor about why he or she doesn't think you should exercise. It might raise some valid points you have not considered. I am almost certain you will need to exercise differently, and this can be a positive thing: Your body will adapt to the change. Speaking up about your need to exercise might change your doctor's viewpoint and maybe, in turn, help another person like yourself down the road.

This might sound strange, but don't assume your doctors exercise! If they don't, they might simply be underestimating your emotional and psychological need to do so. The psychological benefits of exercise alone are enough reason for you

to argue your point. If you're a hard exerciser, the doctor might be assuming that you want to resume the same activities, and that might not sound like a reasonable idea in light of the challenges you are experiencing. Ask about lower-impact

exercise alternatives: a walking program, isometric strength training, pool exercise or biking.

The piece you have complete control around is your diet, and this is arguably the most important part of any fitness routine. People can exercise all they want, but without good nutrition they'll never fully reap the benefits. Eat well, and be persistent with your doctor. **jo**

Information in this column should not be used in place of advice from a licensed health care professional. If you have a health or fitness question, e-mail DEAR ETHEL at mariacallahan@gmail.com or visit www.mariacallahan.net. You can contact Aaron Hornstein at aaronpsyc@yahoo.com.