State of Mind

HIV treatment plans must also nourish individuals' mental and spiritual well-being.

February 9, 2018 By Kate Ferguson

In 1985, more than three decades prior to meeting Maria Davis, Carlton Wilborn learned he was living with HIV. The aftershocks were life changing. "I had this massive defiance in my system," he recalls. "At the time, I was sexually active with men and women and dating a female at the time. I knew that she was interested in having kids, so I was completely paranoid to tell her because I was afraid of what kind of response I might get. One version of me was riddled with shame, and the other version of me was like my warrior self. But, honestly, I think that was my spirit speaking to hold me through the journey."

At that time, Wilborn was one of seven male dancers featured on Madonna's Blond Ambition World Tour. (He kept his diagnosis a secret from his family for about 14 years.) When he finally shared his HIV status with his partner at the time, this significant other ended the relationship. Later, at a party, Wilborn learned that his reputation was in ruins. "I got a call that someone was at a party and was telling all these people who knew me in the industry what I had done, that I was HIV positive and that I lied to this guy," Wilborn recalls. "That embarrassment was my worst nightmare come true."

Eventually, Wilborn wrote Front and Center: How I Learned to Live There, a memoir that included a chapter "dedicated to the HIV part of my story," he says. "I positioned that book specifically to be the vehicle to get me on the other side. I thought that if I could just have something out that's public so I don't always have to drop the news on my own, then people can decide if they want to invite me to their party, hire me for their gig or if they want to date me. That began to sort of cushion the trauma for me, and it's been a healing process ever since."

Wilborn's insights from his experiences led him to launch a career as a life coach. "My work, at the end of the day, is really about igniting people to further freedom, courage and healing," he says.

Like Wilborn, Maria Davis is a veteran of the entertainment industry. Almost 25 years ago, Davis began organizing parties and showcases for recording artists at popular clubs in New York City. Today, these events, which she calls Mad Wednesdays (M-A-D are Davis's initials; her full name is Maria Antonnette Davis), continue.

Throughout the years, Davis has helped promote and build the careers of hip-hop stars such as Jay-Z by providing promising new rappers with the opportunity—and a venue—to perform their

music. (Interestingly, Jay-Z cemented Davis's legend when he included a sample of her emceeing a Mad Wednesday event at which he performed on his song "22 Two's," which is featured on his debut album, Reasonable Doubt.)

When Davis received her diagnosis, in 1995, folks on the street had their own nickname for the virus that many still did not understand. "Everybody called the virus 'the monster' at that time," she says. "You didn't get the monster. If you did, who could you talk to? I was in the music industry, so there was nobody to talk to."

For a while, when the illness affected her appearance, some folks shunned Davis. "No one knew I was living with the virus," she says. "I had a hole in my tongue the size of a quarter, and I was losing weight rapidly. People were asking if I was on drugs, and then I was telling people different lies."

Eventually, Davis was hospitalized. A one-week stay turned into six and a half weeks, and she stopped hosting parties to concentrate on healing, a process that included educating herself about the virus. In 2000, Davis's story appeared in the book Souls of My Sisters: Black Women Break Their Silence, Tell Their Stories, and Heal Their Spirit. That same year, a friend asked her to host shows again at a spot called Soul Café. Davis began to throw parties again. But now, she included HIV awareness in her showcases. She was an activist teaching people about the virus and motivating those living with HIV to love themselves and speak up for what they needed and wanted. She wanted to show everyone that it was possible to bounce back from the trauma of an HIV diagnosis and the fear and isolation that can accompany this life-changing reality.

In 2014, the pharmaceutical company Merck approached her to become a spokesperson for its I Design HIV awareness and education campaign. Davis was happy to oblige. With her illness under control, Davis believed she was making all the right moves. The initiative ran for almost 10 years.

But "my mind was playing little tricks on me," Davis says. "I realized that although I'd been an activist and living with this disease for a very long time, a lot of stuff had built up inside me. I'd been treating the body, but I hadn't been treating my mind and my spirit."

When Merck reached out to Davis again, this time they teamed her with Wilborn, who was now a wellness coach. At first, Davis misunderstood. She thought she and Wilborn would tour together to promote wellness. But he was there to help her address her mental health issues.

During Davis's first session with Wilborn, he asked her, "What's the stuff that's holding you back? What's blocking you?"

Anyone can have problems with mental health. But, according to the National Institutes of Health, people living with HIV have higher rates of mental health conditions than the general public. Among other issues, individuals with HIV may feel depressed, anxious, hopeless and not in control of their lives. A wellness plan that includes a focus on mental health support can tackle these matters and help improve overall well-being.

Like Davis, many folks may find themselves suffering from the aftereffects of HIV stigma when they recall past incidents that caused them pain, shame and humiliation. “My first session with Carlton was very deep; we talked about forgiveness and some of the things that I said I had forgiven as they related to my family issues,” Davis says. “Afterward, I realized that I had to work on forgiveness even more because it’s one thing to say that you forgive people, but you’ve not really forgiven them if what happened keeps popping back up in your mind. My problem was: How do I forgive and then let go? Another thing was that I took care of the world and made sure everyone was OK, but I didn’t make sure that Maria was OK.”

Wilborn’s coaching sessions with Davis were structured in three parts: “a move-it-out phase, a move-it-in phase and a move-it-up phase,” he says. “What I brought to Maria is about getting authentic. It’s clear that she’s obviously been thriving in the world and doing very powerful things—as many people are—but that doesn’t mean there’s not muck and mar in the way of reaching our ultimate holistic freedom.”

Adds Wilborn: “If individuals can remember what they’re made of, what they’ve overcome and what they’ve created, the wellness package is just another component to their lives that allows them to trust more in themselves.”

For Davis, another huge issue was procrastination. She discussed the problem with Wilborn and he listened. “Some people can’t afford wellness coaches,” she says. “But, guess what, there’s somebody in your family you can talk to or a social worker at your clinic. There is always someone you can talk to who you can really build with, who makes you feel like they’re listening to what you say. That’s the most important thing. People want to know that they’re being heard.”

The interaction between individuals living with HIV and their doctors is a partnership. “It’s a relationship where you have the right to challenge them and suggest ideas to them,” Wilborn says. “Right now, one of the things that I most respect about my doctor is that he always has an open mind to some of the strategies I offer—or at least has an open mind to hear my thoughts.”

One of Wilborn’s goals as a life coach is to help people realize that they are the masters of their lives. “So many people—whether or not they’re dealing with HIV—perceive of doctors as gods, but we have a voice about our lives,” he says. “Part of my coaching work is authenticity. I get people to have a voice about their lives and to honor their rightful place in its healing and wellness.”

“Carlton is helping me clear my mind so I can stop procrastinating and write this book that I want to produce,” Davis says. “If your mind ain’t right, how can you be hopeful?”

The path to achieving total wellness requires that individuals take responsibility for their health. It means moving beyond just accepting a treatment plan from your health care team and following their instructions. “You can be a part of that treatment plan,” Davis says. “That way, you’re all working together. For me, it means that I can live moving ahead into my best years and doing even greater things that I’ve never done before.”

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