

# Yoursself

by  
Rebekka Valian

**Looking back on my health, I'm sure I contracted HIV in 1990, but it wasn't confirmed until 1992,** when Larry, my boyfriend of two years, was diagnosed with AIDS. Two months later, I tested positive. From day one, I tried to cultivate a positive attitude about my life with HIV. In an effort to keep myself grounded and calm and not get too psyched out, I kept my diagnosis under wraps for a while because I didn't want other people's reactions and fears to affect me. I tried a bunch of alternative therapies such as acupuncture and herbs — some didn't work for me but those that did I continue to use today. I thought if I could keep my mind, body and spirit in synch, my health would remain stable. My CD4 count was quite high in those days. Larry, however, upon diagnosis had full-blown AIDS.

As Larry's health declined, he made preparations to die and made peace where necessary. He passed away on August 14, 1994, with me by his side. I was so proud of him. He made death look easy. After we said goodbye, Larry took his last breath. All his energy was sucked inward, as if his spirit completely entered his body on his last breath, flew down to his feet, turned and shot up and out through the crown of his head. My heart was pounding and my body shaking as I held his hand. I was in complete awe of the beauty of this moment. I felt the light in the room, and now that I've since assisted in the birth of my goddess-daughter, I have to say, the energy in the room when Larry died was very similar — sacred and beautiful — to the energy I felt at the birth. I share this experience because it was extremely empowering to me. Larry taught me not to fear death.

I've been living with the virus now for 13 years. Complementary therapies such as massage, acupuncture, Traditional Chinese Medicine, herbs, yoga, meditation and visualization help me to rejuvenate and stay optimistic about my health. For a long time I was reluctant to take HIV drugs because I had a bias against Western medicine, especially after having watched Larry suffer from the effects of high-dose AZT that was commonly prescribed in the early 1990s. But four years ago I added a drug cocktail to my therapies. At 30 CD4 cells, my immune system had become so depleted and I'd developed the opportunistic infection MAC. So I finally backed down and decided to believe my doctor when she told me I didn't have long >

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## TREE OF LIFE

**P**art of living in balance is feeling one's connection to nature, to the Universe and to other people. Notice your connection with the world around you and don't miss the synchronicity of events in your day. This is one way the Universe speaks to us.

If you can't be in nature, bring nature to yourself by closing your eyes and visualizing or feeling yourself walking in the woods or along the water's edge. Your body can still reap the benefits of actually being there. Breathe deeply and let serenity reign.

You need only 5 minutes to do this. Designate a time and space for yourself (even if it means locking yourself in the washroom). Sit in a comfortable position that allows your spine to be erect. Gently close your eyes. See or sense yourself sitting under a magnificent tree. You chose the details (oak, maple, willow, palm). Inhale and exhale through your nose, both to a count of 4. On each inhale, fill your belly up like a big balloon, up to your chest, up to your shoulders, to a count of 4. Exhale slowly to 4, contracting your belly toward your spine, releasing every last drop of breath.

As you inhale, breathe in clean, life-supporting oxygen, produced by the tree. See a line of connection from the tree to your lungs. When you exhale, you are expelling toxins from your body. The carbon dioxide you release is food that's essential to the tree. See a line of energy back to the tree. A symbiotic relationship exists. We are deeply connected and dependent on each other for existence. Feel your connection. Repeat this visualization for 5 to 10 minutes until you feel relaxed and grounded. You can use this simple exercise any time to relax.

**Hazra, 46**

*Diagnosed with HIV: 1994; CD4 count: 1,100; Viral load: undetectable. Aromatherapist. Reflexologist. Reiki practitioner. Student. York Region, Ontario*

**E**very morning when I wake up, I deal with exhaustion. So I do Reiki, bringing the universal energy to myself. It's the best self-help method I know. After Reiki, I do aromatherapy — blending essential oils according to my mood and physical condition — and massage myself. The oils help me when I have nausea, diarrhea, depression. After the massage, I go about my day feeling really good.

Each morning I design a very reasonable schedule for myself, so at the end of the day I've been able to do everything I planned. This brings me a feeling of satisfaction. I do various things to keep my body moving, such as belly dancing and Qi Gong. I like the belly dancing, it's not only exercise but also fun. This in itself creates a feeling of well-being. I also get regular treatments (massage, reflexology, trager, shiatsu, Reiki) from other practitioners. My personal belief is that there is a physical aspect to any disease, but there's also a psychosomatic aspect to it, and it's important to work with every aspect for self-healing. To me, psychotherapy has become more of a spiritual journey and has helped me bring changes to my life and relationships. ✂

Taking time out for you is one of the best things you can do

**Andrea Rudd, "over 40"**

*Diagnosed with HIV: 1988; CD4 count: 1,317; Viral load: undetectable. Artist. Works at various community-based organizations. Toronto, Ontario*

**H**aving experienced an extended period of time when I slept no more than an hour or two per night, sleep is something that I hold in high esteem. I had a terrible time when I started taking antiretrovirals; I couldn't sleep at all for a few months. When you can't sleep, you can't cope, your sense of reality gets totally distorted. For one or two days you can go without sleep, but after three months, it's just insane. You go mad.

What changed that state is that I went to a naturopathic doctor, Ken Luby, and he gave me one homeopathic remedy, which totally shifted the cycle I was in. I only took one dose, and from that moment on I was able to sleep again. It was very, very powerful. My whole life changed. Ken Luby is my hero. He was profoundly helpful.

Ever since then, having a good night's sleep has become a priority for me. I do Feldenkrais exercises before I go to bed. They're very slow movements which totally bring things into the moment by relaxing and slowing down your whole being. They're grounding and centering. You don't have to exert much energy to do them, so they're easy to do at night when you're tired. I've always done exercise and body work because they take you out of your head and bring you into the moment. I find that both useful and meaningful — getting out of my thoughts and into the moment. ✂

# 8 *Rebekka's* steps to de-stress

## **Drink lots of water (8 glasses a day).**

If your CD4 count is below 200, try to purchase water that uses reverse osmosis to filter cryptosporidium and giardia (read the labels). Our bodies are made up of 75% to 90% water, and water flushes out toxins from the body and hydrates every living cell.

**Eat living foods** (fresh fruits and greens, whole grains, soy products, juicing). Sense the vibratory energy of your food. Observe the visible life of a fresh green salad vs. over-processed, overcooked food. Avoid the processed-food aisles in your grocery store as much as possible. Check that the life hasn't been processed out of your food...again, read the labels!

## **Slow down and savour the moment.**

Be mindful and present. Rest and relax. Get a massage to boost your body's circulation and immune system.

**Trust yourself.** Listen to your inner voice. Keep a journal. Dare to fulfill a dream. Learn the power of intent. Put out a wish or prayer and don't be surprised if you get what you ask for. Remember to give thanks.

**Rejoice.** Celebrate in a favourite activity. Try Indian tablas or African or Native drumming. Studies show that you can boost your white blood cell count when you drum.

**Exercise.** Get your heart pumping and blood circulating. And don't forget to breathe! You're flushing out toxins and boosting your immune system. Walk, swim, dance, cycle...pick your favourite. Not only will it benefit you physically, it will also lift your spirits. Sex counts as exercise!

**Speak sweetly to yourself.** Your words to yourself can either heal or harm you. Speaking and thinking positive thoughts raises the vibration within you and your environment. Psyche yourself up. Every cell in your body will respond. Each of us is unique and holds different gifts and perspectives. Respect yourself.

**Seek out help.** Utilize your AIDS organizations. They may have resources or programs that make your life easier. Opportunities may exist that you are unaware of. Connect with others. If you live in a remote area, reach out and access e-mail or toll-free numbers. Communicating with other women with similar issues is an invaluable resource of support and information. Accept support from family and friends. Celebrate your relationships.

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to live. Although today my health is good (600 CD4 cells and an undetectable viral load), I'm experiencing side effects from my medication, most notably lipodystrophy. My legs and face are thinning while my waist is thickening. Seeing these changes in my figure is frustrating and it's an effort to keep my vanity in check.

Practicing yoga has helped me to survive in more ways than one. The word *yoga* means "to yoke" or "union." It's about uniting the body, mind and spirit in order to improve health and increase self-awareness. This yoking also refers to the union of the individual's consciousness with the larger infinite consciousness. The postures, which are synchronized with the breath, allow you to check in deeply with your body and quiet your busy mind. On a physiological level, yoga improves blood circulation, respiration, digestion, liver detoxification and lymphatic drainage. You're building your immune system when you do yoga. It's also helped melt away a few inches and, thankfully, helps to alleviate depression as well.

When a person is depressed, we sometimes use expressions like "heavy-hearted" or "disheartened" to describe this unpleasant state. Depression can be a reaction to too much stress. Literally, depression stresses the heart and body and overactivates the adrenal system. When practicing yoga, your flow of stretches and breathing techniques becomes a moving meditation in which the body is able to deeply relax. The body's autonomic nervous system switches into the parasympathetic mode, giving every cell much needed rest. As a result, the mind and body quiet, and a beautiful stillness comes over you in which deep healing can occur. You feel a sense of calm and, with regular practice, the heaviness of depression often disperses. (For more info on yoga for PHAs, see "Introduction to Yoga," *The Positive Side*, fall/winter 2001.)

Stress is an inhibitor to health. When one's immune system is compromised, it is essential to de-stress in as many ways as possible. Presently, for me, this means not working and using this time to return to health. I'm learning to live in balance, creating space and time away from my busy life to nourish and recharge myself. Having the courage to say "no" at times and simplify my life is essential for the restoration of my immune system.

Contracting HIV has been an invitation for me to slow down, be more mindful and savour the moment. Every activity is more enjoyable when I take time to really stay present and experience what I'm doing — whether it's practicing yoga or cooking dinner. I encourage you to allow yourself some down-time to meditate, take a walk in nature, do yoga, receive a massage or take a nap (in a hammock, if you can!).



Rebekka Valian is a member of Positive Women's Network ([www.pwn.bc.ca](http://www.pwn.bc.ca)) in Vancouver, where she volunteers as a reflexologist, aromatherapist and yoga teacher. She also teaches yoga at Friends for Life.