



Looking Back

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In the mid '90s when triple combination therapies came out, most people living with HIV/AIDS found they got very quick results, but there were a lot of different side effects to cope with. So there was a focus on how can complementary medicine—which is really a bunch of different modalities—mitigate some of these side-effects.

Unfortunately, because most of these therapies aren't covered by the government, a lot is paid for out of pocket. We get a lot of calls at CATIE (www.catie.ca) asking: 'I want to see so-and-so and he/she said to use this. Is this valid? Is this real? Is it a good use of my money? Does it really do what they say it will do?' And so we realized that we needed to publish a document detailing what works and what doesn't, how it works and what the red flags are to watch out for. That was how "A Practical Guide to Complementary Therapies" was developed (www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/practical-guide-complementary-therapies).

There are many benefits to pursuing complementary therapies. With there being so many drugs you have to take, your body can become overwhelmed by what's called "pill burden." There are many other stress related issues as well, like societal and institutional homophobia, HIV and AIDS phobia, even within our own communities. Also, in the last few years there have been many legal issues around disclosure and criminalization. We live in a stressful culture—regardless of HIV status—so we need to find ways to keep the stress down. De-stressing directly benefits the immune system.

The important question that comes up for HIV positive persons is: what do you want to do with the rest of your life? It used to be that everyone died in the '80s and early '90s, but now as people are living longer, they are left wondering: what do I do? You don't want to spend your life just popping pills. You need a reason to get out of bed in the morning, besides just taking your medication. Because you are living with a virus that's not going to go away anytime soon, you need to come up with whatever strategy is going to enhance your whole physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and sexual well-being. You need to live your life fully.

So plan a future—whatever you want it to be—and have goals in place, not only for your complementary medicine, but for your life as well. If you can incorporate alternative therapies into your daily life, like meditation, going for a walk, or choosing more nutritious food, then you will live a

healthier, less stressful life, and have fewer side-effects from that pill burden. At the end of the day, it's all about how can you manage and minimize those stresses and keep your immune system healthy.

In CATIE's manual, "Managing Your Health," I've written in chapter five how you can incorporate complementary therapies into your life. When choosing something for yourself, an important question is: can you commit to the change? Take baby steps. Instead of taking a whole slew of multi-vitamins all at once, maybe start off with a basic multi-vitamin; then you could add a B complex; then maybe a week later add some calcium, so you're not dealing with 20 new pills all at once.

I always recommend for people to pick one mind/body and one physical/body modality. Exercise you can do anywhere and you don't have to join a gym if you don't want to. The important thing is to be clear in what you want to achieve. And remember, when you are trying something new, it's a good idea to get your physician involved, especially if you are ingesting anything like micro-nutrients, herbs or homeopathic remedies. Many HIV primary care doctors today are very pro-complementary medicine.

Complementary therapy is not going to give you a quick fix though—it takes time. If you're looking for a quick fix, you're going to be disappointed. There's no magic bullet. Anyone who's started meditation, the first thing they realize is that they have a very busy mind. It takes a few months to find that calm awareness. Take baby steps and don't be too hard on yourself when you go three steps forward, but two back.

When people find the right complementary medicine that works for them, not only do they stick with it, but they find they have much more energy, they're more productive and calm and have a better world outlook.

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CATIE is Canada's source for up-to-date, unbiased information about HIV and hepatitis C, connecting people living with HIV or hepatitis C, at-risk communities, healthcare providers and community organizations with the knowledge, resources and expertise to reduce transmission and improve quality of life.