Gay men often refer to aging with HIV as a “triple threat”: homophobia, HIV stigma and ageism. Stigma takes a toll on our mental and physical health. This can manifest in physical symptoms and create a negative feedback loop of illness and isolation. Managing the triple threat is essential to gay men’s health and well-being.

Shame vs. Pride
Stigma not only affects self-esteem and identity, but internalized stigma can create a pattern of shame that leads to isolation, depression, and poor self-care. Many gay men received messages, often unspoken, that homosexuality was “deviant”, “sick”, or “shameful”. Because of the unconscious ways stigma is learned, shame can be triggered without our awareness and can manifest in many ways:

- our self-esteem
- our ability to socialize
- our feelings about our “love-ability”
- our willingness to advocate for ourselves
- our belief that we deserve to be treated fairly
- our sense of hope, safety, and justice

Get Support
The presence of a strong support network can help you manage the challenges of living with HIV and of aging in general. Peers who understand your experience are vitally important when you are dealing with stigma. Here are ten suggestions for widening your social network:

- Renew old acquaintances.
- Seek out people with whom you have things in common.
- Strike up a conversation with someone you’ve never met.
- Don’t wait for people to contact you.
- Consider professional support through an agency, support group, or therapist.
- Adopt a pet.
- Use the internet to cast a wider net.
- Form a reading group or some other type of social activity.

Be of Service
- Helping others through productivity, creativity, and passing on knowledge is the primary way you can fight off stagnation in midlife. Age and experience have left you with hard-earned wisdom. Through mentoring, coaching, leading, or consulting, you remind yourself of the skills you have to offer.
- Consider how you can get involved in your community. What skills do you have to offer a younger person through teaching or tutoring? Can you help someone who is in need? Have you ever thought about being an HIV peer educator, or participating on an advisory board or advocacy group?

Have Some Fun
The fatigue and pain of stigma can wear you down without your awareness, leading to isolation and depression. Recharge and replenish yourself with some positive energy. Do you have enough play time in your life? When we play we can:

- Learn new skills.
- Make friends and socialize.
- Immerse ourselves in creativity.
- Channel our energy toward a productive goal.
- Get our heart rate up.
- Work out anger.
- Manage losses in a less charged atmosphere.

Your options for play are as boundless as your imagination. Learn a sport. Take a dance class. Pick up a paint brush. Play a board game. Write a story. Care for animals. Garden. I love giving a toy to kids only to watch them invent a game involving the box it came in.