

WHEN OPPOSITES ATTRACT

How couples deal with being **sero**discordant

BY DAVID DURAN

SEX IS A TOPIC that most are reluctant to discuss openly. Some feel awkward or embarrassed or even guilty discussing their feelings about sex openly and honestly. Now toss in HIV with sex and the discussion comes to an overwhelming standstill. Well, not for everyone, but for most. Living with HIV can, at times, take over your life and make you feel like an outsider. Disclosing your positive status to anyone is not an easy task. Many struggle with telling friends and family, not to mention a potential partner. It's a topic that has been off-limits for too long and it's time those living with HIV gain the confidence to disclose openly and without fear of rejection. Sex is a natural part of life and we need it, even those of us living with HIV.

So how does someone with HIV go about dating, hooking up, or meeting a potential partner? Should they only seek out others who are also HIV-positive? Or should they immediately disclose their status on the first date? These are questions that everyone has an opinion about, and it's time we started openly discussing these opinions so that from within, we can identify those responses that are ignorant and uneducated and instead of automatically degrading the person who made them or brushing their comments aside, we can help change minds by educating and enlightening.

So what's a serodiscordant couple? To put it simply, it's when one person in the relationship is HIV-positive and the other is negative. It's normal, they are out there, and they come in all different combinations, gay and straight.

New love: Jason and Zach

IT'S A TYPICAL boy-meets-boy story but modernized since the two met on the gay mobile dating app Grindr. Jason, an unapologetic HIV activist, has no shame telling anyone how he met his boyfriend. "Mobile sex apps can surprise you every once in awhile," he said. "You never know when or where you will find Mr. Right." The two have been together under a year and are committed to each other. Jason, who has been open about his status for years and has served as an HIV advocate in numerous ways, including being a national spokesperson, said he had no struggles bringing up the subject of his status when he first met Zach, telling him on their second date. "In the eight years that I've been aware of my status, I've found that telling

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JASON VILLALOBOS



SHAWN and GWENN HAVE BEEN EDUCATING PEOPLE TOGETHER, USING HUMOR AND CANDOR TO TALK ABOUT THEIR TEN-YEAR RELATIONSHIP.

the truth and being up front and honest has never come back to bite me in the ass.” Zach was impressed with Jason’s honesty and it made a great impression on him.

Jason wasn’t always as comfortable with his status as he is today. He recalls breaking down in tears each time he disclosed to potential partners. “It was a fear of rejection and just the simple fact that I had not come to a place of peace with my status.” With time, he realized that the more he talked about it and became more open, the better it was for his confidence and for always being prepared for the worst reactions from men.

Zach, who is over ten years younger

than Jason, is part of a new generation that never experienced the worst of the AIDS epidemic and has been led to believe that HIV is a one-pill-a-day manageable disease. Jason didn’t expect him to be as understanding and educated as he was on the subject, but Zach was different. “I feel bad for underestimating him and expecting a more frightened, stereotypical response based simply on him being 21,” said Jason. Zach was aware of how the virus is transmitted but admits to having gone on the Internet to do more research after their second date, for peace of mind. He then went to Jason with his questions and the two had many open and frank conversations. “We’re

always so scared to disclose, and I think we’re doing a disservice to ourselves and our community by assuming that this will be a deal breaker,” said Jason.

When it comes to sex, Jason says both of them are sex-positive. They established some general rules like using condoms for anal sex every time, and that was about it. “My boyfriend and I love to have sex, and we act in accordance with what we both feel is safe behavior that will protect him from the virus, and then we just sort of let all of that fall away and get down to business...and it’s very fun business.” Jason has an undetectable viral load, so the risk of transmission is extremely low, and the couple is relatively

carefree when it comes to oral sex and other non-penetrating activities.

Zach’s family wasn’t as progressive as their son in the beginning. His family was giving him inaccurate facts about transmission and HIV in general. After addressing these topics together, Jason encouraged him to make an appointment with his doctor to ask any questions if he wanted an impartial source of information. “I’ve also had some very frank, sometimes a bit tense—for them—conversations with his friends and family, but in the end, I think everyone walks happier when concerns are raised and dealt with in a timely, non-dramatic manner.”

Jason and Zach are a young couple, a

new couple, and they are a serodiscordant couple who are open about their feelings and who take the time to communicate. Jason is an advocate who has done much for his community and serves as a role model and inspiration to many. His openness, awareness, humility, and no-shame attitude has touched others and saved lives. “I feel disclosing early takes an incredible weight off one’s shoulders, as that piece of information hangs out in the back of your mind, gradually pulsing so loudly and nervously that it begins to inhibit your own thought process and behavior. Just spit it out and do so in a way that’s very calm and straightforward, and be receptive to answering all questions.”

Educating together: Shawn and Gwenn

FOR MORE THAN 10 years, Shawn and Gwenn have been educating people together, putting themselves out there and openly talking about their relationship as a way to open up dialogue about issues of sexual health. Their use of humor and candor has successfully engaged tens of thousands of people as their messages have been shared through mainstream media outlets. Their more recent venture has been with their YouTube channel, YouTube.com/shawnandgwenn. The couple vlog about current events relating to HIV, but do it in a way that’s fun and very easy to watch.

The two met when Gwenn was in graduate school doing research on HIV and looking for an HIV-positive speaker for a presentation. She was put in touch with Shawn through a local AIDS service organization. The two didn’t end up working together on her project but met a month later when both were attending a discussion being given by Jeanne White, Ryan White’s mother. Disclosure wasn’t an issue for the couple, as Gwenn knew from the initial call that Shawn was HIV-positive. “As we were both HIV educators the issues surrounding HIV came up frequently in conversation, and those conversations didn’t stop when we realized [our] feelings went beyond friendship and we were falling in love,” said Shawn.

When they decided they were going to be a couple, Gwenn did have some concerns about what it would be like to be in a relationship with someone who was HIV-positive. She knew about HIV prevention,

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but what helped her most was having a friend who happened to be in a serodiscordant relationship. Through the help of her friend, she was able to ask him questions about his relationship with his partner. “Having this resource is rare, but was extremely important to her,” says Shawn.

Shawn, who was diagnosed at the age of 11 after contracting HIV through infected blood products used to treat his hemophilia, admits that disclosure wasn’t always this easy for him. “It wasn’t until 10 years after my diagnosis that I was comfortable leading with that information. Disclosure is a difficult topic because the positive person needs to feel like their trust has been earned and if that takes a while, the person receiving the information can feel like it took too long.” Shawn now finds it much easier to be confident in his status and not be consumed by fear of rejection, but also admits that getting there takes time.

When it comes to sex, the couple uses condoms and says they are very open with each other about what they are both comfortable with. “Fortunately, we have always been on the same page where that is concerned and those discussions have evolved over time,” said Shawn. “My medications work and I have had an undetectable viral load for a long time. This, combined with condom use and the knowledge that transmission under these circumstances is practically non-existent, allows us to have a stress-free sex life.”

Preaching what you believe: Vicki and Virgil

VICKI HAS TAKEN her diagnosis by the reins and instead of letting it consume her, she is out in her community spreading her message and making a difference. She works with several different HIV organizations and promotes abstinence before marriage to everyone, as well as forms of contraception to those who are not aligned with her personal beliefs. She speaks about how people of faith

PHOTO: JEN FARIELLO

“We enjoy trying different condoms, it’s great foreplay.”

respond to HIV and AIDS. She also provides prevention education to those in need, as well as testing and peer navigation. She is a leader at pulling her community together, especially in observance of HIV/AIDS days and events.



VICKI and VIRGIL HAVE LEARNED TO KEEP THE PLEASURE IN THEIR MARRIAGE.

She met her husband Virgil through a mutual friend and said her status came up during a conversation one evening about a month after they’d been dating and abstaining. “I just asked him what he knew about HIV and he told me he knew it caused AIDS.” At that time, Vicki had recently gone to get tested herself but had not gotten her results. She and her ex-husband had discovered at the time of their divorce that he in fact was HIV-positive. And that’s when Virgil decided to get tested as well. His results came back negative, but not Vicki’s. “He was devastated at first but willing to get educated about HIV,” said Vicki. She feels that one should

not disclose their status without first giving it some thought. “It takes time to adjust to being HIV-positive, and one should always disclose in a safe place.”

When it comes to sex, Vicki says she and Virgil use condoms every time, even for oral sex. “We enjoy trying different condoms, it’s great foreplay.” She is confident in her prevention methods and doesn’t feel like she is facing any issues with her sex life. Vicki has been on antiretroviral medications for over 10 years and has been with Virgil for 12 years.

Truvada as PrEP

TRUVADA, ONE OF the most used antiretroviral drugs on the market, was recently approved as a prevention method for HIV-negative people considered at high risk of being infected. The controversial use of this drug has sparked a lot of debate on who should be taking it and who is considered “high risk.” It seems like an ideal option for serodiscordant couples, but that wasn’t the case for the couples interviewed in this story. All three said they were confident with their prevention methods and didn’t feel the need to put the HIV-negative partner through the pitfalls and side effects that taking HIV medication can cause. It’s important to note that the use of Truvada as PrEP, like other forms of prevention, is not 100% effective. Many recent studies have proven the drug to be most successful in prevention when used correctly and in combination with other prevention methods.

It’s time to talk

FOR SOME SERODISCORDANT couples, it may be time for further conversations. No matter what stage of the relationship you’re in, open dialogue and reaffirming discussions are never bad things to have from time to time. For those that might need help starting the conversation, Test Positive Aware Network (TPAN) in Chicago has a therapy group aimed directly at local-area serodiscordant couples. TheTwoOfUs is a free six-week

group that provides prevention education, therapy, and support for up to five couples at a time. There are no restrictions on sexual orientation or gender identities for this particular group and all are welcome. For those not in Chicago, check with your local AIDS service organization—if they don’t offer such a group, suggest it!

And it’s not just sex we should be talking and learning about. Education is key to learning about new drug treatments or the latest advances in research and prevention. Keeping healthy and knowing and understanding everything about HIV empowers couples and strengthens relationships. If something has been working for you within your serodiscordant relationship for years, it doesn’t mean that there aren’t other options. You never know, you could even enhance your sex life!

Eliminate shame

DISCLOSURE BECOMES easier and easier once you are comfortable with who you are. Being confident and knowledgeable in what you are talking about shines through and is self-empowering when “coming out” to someone about your status. And we’ve all been rejected at some point in our lives, for a variety of reasons, so why should being rejected due to HIV hurt any more or less? Doing away with the shame is what helps kill the stigma and fears about HIV.

It’s easier said than done. And it may take longer for some than others. Acceptance of your HIV-positive status is key to your health. The mental anguish caused when first learning about your status can affect some for the rest of their lives—it’s a pain that is often deeply rooted in confusion, mistrust, anger, sadness, and shame. But once you learn to accept yourself for who you are, like Jason, Shawn, and Vicki, you can have long, lasting, and loving relationships with just about anyone. PA



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