



| New Relationships |



New Relationships

“When I was told I was HIV-positive
I thought for a brief and terrifying moment that my life was over
It was a moment of true devastation.
And then something else kicked in. A faint hope, a glimmer of strength
Part of this strength has been my friends and family.
When I talk to other women who are HIV-positive there are some
common threads.
Like the loss of not being able to be a lover, or never being a mother
I really thought that no one would ever love me again: love me, love my
virus
Yeah, right
I don’t believe in fairy tales, and then you came along.
Fast forward and it’s a knight in shining wet weather bike gear riding a
CBR 600
I am quietly amazed each morning that I wake up with you
And I am overwhelmed with the love we share
Even with what we deal with
You’ve helped get over the “I’ll never love again”
And you’ve helped me rediscover me again
Now we’re tackling the part about being a mother
But that’s a whole other story”

*Give of yourself and love others. You will get
back more than you give*

Partners

We are a very diverse group of women in our attitudes to starting new relationships. For some of us, HIV has shut off our sexuality. We avoid sexual encounters and believe we may never have sex again. We don’t want to start a new relationship because we are scared of disclosing our HIV status, consequently we don’t put ourselves “out there” like we used to.

“At times I’m not sexual. I feel like an empty shell, nothing to offer.”

“I don’t feel like a woman very often, only a mother.”

For most of us, HIV takes away our femininity - of feeling like a woman - at least for some time after we are diagnosed. Many of us feel that we are no longer attractive and no-one will ever want us again: we feel undesirable, unlovable. Some of us have become embarrassed about what our bodies look like because of weight loss or other changes due to the side effects of the medications.

“I forgot I am still a woman. Sometimes I feel asexual. I don’t want to be loved, have sex or feel anything. Other times I crave touch, intimacy and companionship.”

“I don’t know if I will ever want to have sex again. I think it’s a combination of hating the way I look now and feeling desire for someone who desires me unlikely. I need to get the motivation to go out and meet people again and learn to love this body that I have so often thought of as my prison.”



Many of us fear rejection when we enter into a new relationship. HIV complicates relationships. We have to spend more energy and effort and thought about how to disclose and when to disclose. We are afraid of not being accepted. We recognise that anybody who does accept us as a sexual partner must be a special person. Some of us stay in unhealthy relationships for years because we fear we can never find another partner, but in hindsight, after the relationship ends, we realise how soul-destroying this is.

“Recently I met two non-positive guys who were okay with sex and the virus. The majority run away, which is hurtful and feels like you have been kicked in the gut.”

Most of us feel we will never find another partner but that is just not true. Many of us have developed good, caring relationships with new partners since our diagnosis. We feel loved and supported and we have someone to love and hug.

“My partner is wonderful. I couldn’t ask for a better relationship.”

“My man makes me feel feminine all the time.”

Although many of us live in fear of transmitting HIV to our partners,

we realise the importance and need to have open, honest discussion about safer sex and at the same time we may have difficulty negotiating it. Condoms can be frustrating, not conducive to fun sex play, not easy to use, and often can interfere with the mood. Some of us choose not to disclose our status to sexual partners. We are now told that if we take antiretroviral therapy consistently, have an undetectable viral load for at least six months and have no sexually transmitted infections, then we are not sexually infectious¹ and are not likely to transmit HIV sexually, but many of us need more information and greater reassurance about this statement.

“I met a wonderful man who wasn’t scared off by disclosure of my positive status and I’m now enjoying my first new relationship since diagnosis. Even though I am determined to ensure that my new partner is not infected, the reality is that HIV impacts his life every day, just as it does mine.”

Over time, many of us have reclaimed our femininity and learned to celebrate it.

“HIV took away my femininity for many years. I feel great now and love myself being a woman.”

“Important. Love it. Hanging on to it.”

¹ Undetectable viral load and risk of HIV transmission: The ‘Swiss statement’, AFAO, 2009.
http://www.afao.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/4594/Dec09_factsheet_swissstatement.pdf

I have choices

Children

“I was overjoyed at 26 weeks when you kicked me.
Proudly pregnant, eating chilli sauce sandwiches at 2 in the morning,
“Burning Spear” playing out loud.
I loved you already.
I barely remembered taking tablets three times a day with grapefruit juice.
I hate grapefruit juice
Blood test all the time. Everything is great.
You were born at 9:30 in the morning, 3.4 kilograms.
PERFECT
Nanna and your uncle couldn’t wait to hold you.
Eight years old. Wow! Years have passed so quickly. You are a young man.
I love you more than all the trees.
Your music is inspired. You are so gentle and brave.
We have travelled. What adventures and stories to tell.
Sometimes I get tired, I snap at you. You say I’m mean. I can’t always do
the things you want.
I told you I have a virus. It hasn’t gone away.
Last month I got sick and couldn’t pick you up from school. I slept a lot.
You did your homework in bed with me. You played “Mary had a little
lamb” on your violin.
I was scared. This time I wasn’t sure. I found strength. Thoughts of you.
I am so proud. You are wise. You know who you are. You keep me real.
No time for dwelling.
I love you more than all the trees.
The doctors said I wouldn’t have children. I had you.
PERFECT
The specialist said I might not live. I started living the day you kicked me.
You are my friend for life. Thank you for loving me.
I have a virus.
My secret is HIV”

Some of us who were diagnosed before the advent of triple combination antiretroviral therapy were told that we could never have children and have learned to live with that loss.

“I didn’t have any children because I was diagnosed so young and didn’t have the information available today. I had a termination and didn’t tell the hospital. It’s one of the few regrets in my life.”

“In many ways my decision not to have children makes me feel like somehow I’m less of a woman and other women have this precious knowledge that I will never have. I have learned to live with my decision and at 40 years old, I was lucky enough to get an 11-year-old stepson, who is my own in my heart and I am his parent of preference.”

Many of us have now been assured that we can have children without passing on the virus. We are very thankful for this possibility and many of us have gone on to have children.

“Waiting for my baby’s HIV results was excruciating. Thank God she is clear so it was all worth it. I am so glad I had her. She is very precious and a joy to me. I am so busy I hardly think about HIV.”

Although raising children is hard work, those of us who have children are grateful that they are part of our lives. Some of us worry too much about the future of our children. We want to be there to see them grow up, find partners and form their own families. For most of us, children provide us with love, fulfilment, hope for the future, inspiration for life. And they keep us grounded.

“The love of my life. My children keep me going and give me unconditional love.”

“My kids, they are the air I breathe.”



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