Daring to Declare

When should you tell your new Valentine you're positive? With some Beyoncé in the background? Over a light lunch? Sex guru Michael Alvear gets HIVers to spill their disclosure secrets--and experts to rate their style

February 1, 2004 By Michael Alvear

Ah, Valentine's Day. For positives, sex and romance—in February or any other month—means confronting the risky business of disclosing their serostatus. Or not. A large University of California San Francisco study published in the June 2003 issue of the American Journal of Public Health reported that 37 percent of gay/bi men, 13 percent of straight men and 10 percent of women had casual sex without disclosing their HIV status. Casual meaning sex with someone other than a primary partner (I personally like sex with someone else's primary partner).

Given those numbers—and the fact that you could land in the big house for not disclosing (see "Jailbait")—POZ invited me, Michael Alvear, gay sex columnist and author of Men Are Pigs, But We Love Bacon, to interrogate HIVers of all orientations, as well as psychologists, researchers and community experts. Why do some tell and others don't? Must you always? What should you wear? Full disclosure: I'm negative.So why am I so interested in talking serostatus? Because the subject pains, liberates, complicates and terrifies many of my readers.

Positives taught me that disclosure depends on who you are (husband hunter? slut?) and how you define romance (back room? altar?). But all had this in common: a willingness to share their hot 'n' heavy disclosure conquests as well as their agonizing humiliations.

Casual Sex

When it comes to fast love, the HIVers I met fell into three camps. The first practice what you could call don't ask, don't tell. Esteban*, a 42-year-old Miamian, has so much sex he should strap a Serta Perfect Sleeper on his back whenever he steps out, but this Latino lover never discloses to casual partners—and never asks them to, either. "I just make sure we have safe sex," he says. "What's the difference between having safe sex with a negative guy and having safe sex with me?" Russell Roberts, a straight African American from Los Angeles, subscribes to Esteban's philosophy. He never used to reveal his status to the ladies he picked up in bars (he's currently taken)."As long as I used a condom," he says, "nobody needed to know my business." Colin, a white New Yorker in recovery, doesn't disclose when he has oral sex—and remembers his barebacking days with regret. "I would say to guys 'Are you sure?' If they said yes, I could live with that."

Experts say men like Esteban, Russell and Colin don't disclose for one simple reason: They may be ho's—but they don't want to get the old heave-ho. "It's not about being sneaky," says Esteban. "It's about protecting yourself from rejection."

"Rejection can make HIVers feel devastated or go into extreme depression—especially when they believe they haven't had an opportunity to discuss their status," says disclosure researcher Julie Serovich, PhD, who adds that getting dissed can cause backlash. "[HIVers] think, 'Why should I take the disclosure initiative?'"

And people aren't just avoiding emotional vulnerability. "What is merely awkward for a negative person to bring up is dangerous for the positive person," says Brad Thomason, a psychologist at New York's Center of HIV Educational Studies and Training (CHEST), who has seen patients who've been physically assaulted after disclosing.

What happens when neggies do bring up HIV? It can force don't ask, don't tell types to take another tack. "I met this guy at a bar, and after we made out and groped each other, he said, 'You're disease free, right?'" recalls Chris, a New Yorker who normally doesn't disclose to casual partners. "I said, 'As a matter of fact, I'm not disease free. I'm HIV positive.' It was incredibly awkward—we were in each other's arms. There's no nice segue to get out of that." Bad neggie etiquette is one reason psychotherapist Michael Shernoff, who has treated hundreds of HIVers, says "own up to your status if you're confronted. That will disarm the attack."

Nyrobi Moss, who educates positive women for SisterLove in Atlanta, says ladies with HIV may have problems, but nosy negative guys isn't one of them. "Men don't care who you been with—they just want to be with you," she laughs.

Do Ask, Do Tell

While disclosing to a fling can be awkward, many feel obligated. Rick Howington will spend hours dancing, chatting and charming a gym dandy—then sabotage all his hard, sweaty work."Ethically, I don't see any other way," says this Atlanta white boy."If the person I got it from had warned me, I might never have been infected." Rick embodies what Serovich describes in her research as the"responsibility factor." Serovich has found that most HIVers who do disclose "hold the conviction that disclosure is the responsible thing to do to protect others."

I should add that Rick doesn't disclose in the bar. He does it en route to his silver Honda Accord. "I don't wait till we're home because I don't want them to feel trapped," he says. "But I also don't tell them in the bar—that's where the fun happened."

Mark, a 37-year-old gay African American from Detroit, has another reason to tell all. "Many a long-term relationship starts with a one-night stand," he says. "If something develops out of that sexual encounter, like a relationship, a lot of trust issues would come up and ruin a potential romance." What if the guy bails? "I don't take it personally because I know they're not rejecting me, they're rejecting the virus," he says. Says Serovich, "There are people who can say, 'There are other guys in the bar—this one's a loser.'"

Mark almost always gets his man even after disclosing, and so does Tim Chittenden, 29, a white, gay ex-Marine in Columbus, Ohio. But Tim doesn't just tell—he also asks. "If I disclose and they say, 'No big deal,' I usually stop and ask, 'Are you positive or negative?' They almost always turn out to be positive. So I'll say, 'At what point were you going to volunteer the information?'" Psychologist Thomason says that "just goes to show you how terrified people can be about disclosing." Which is why Tim drops the subject along with his pants."I usually end the awkwardness," he says, "by screwing them into the mattress springs."

But do ask, do tell doesn't always go so well. A guy once disclosed to a neggie friend of mine at a bar, then, sensing awkwardness, said, "Tell you what: I've gotta go to the bathroom. If I come back and you're still here I know you're cool with it. If you're not, no hard feelings." When he came back, my pal was gone. Which just goes to show you, class doesn't always get ass. Nonetheless I like the bathroom bit, as does Walt Odets, a clinical psychologist and author of the landmark In The Shadow of the Epidemic. "He reduced the discomfort for both parties," he says.

Some HIVers will actually let the "evidence" do the talking,using what Robert Klitzman, MD, and Ronald Bayer, PhD, call "coded communication" in their new book, Mortal Secrets: Truth and Lies in the Age of AIDS. (It's chock-full of provocative tales from HIVers.) Gary, one of the interviewees, says, "You walk into my apartment, and there are medicine bottles all over the place. I mean, it's not hard to figure out." Another handy piece of evidence HIVers use? Why, POZ magazine, of course.

If you're going to disclose to strangers, experts say, do it casually. Like Mark from Detroit, who reveals his status "as if I'm ordering at McDonald's." Thomason adds, "The more secure you are with [disclosing], the more comfortable they're going to be with it." If you're not secure with disclosing but feel you ought to, Michael Mancilla, co-author of the sex guide Love in the Time of HIV, suggests you "think of it as sharing or revealing rather than disclosure. By reframing the idea in your mind you'll reframe it in theirs." (Check out Mancilla's website, www.hivandrelationships.com, which has a large section about disclosure).

I personally never underestimate the power of a cheesy line (I'd be unemployed—and celibate—without it): Two hydrogen atoms meet. One says, "I've lost my electron." The other says, "Are you sure?" The first replies, "Yes, I'm positive."

Casual Casualties

Shelley Frey, a 26-year-old working in the Los Angeles County Fire Department, has another casual-partner strategy: She doesn't have them. "It's hard enough to disclose to someone you love," she says. "I can't bear the thought of being rejected by someone I barely know." Shelley's far from unusual. That University of California San Francisco HIVer study I cited above also showed that 39 percent of heterosexual men, 35 percent of straight women and 28 percent of all gay/bi men are abstinent until they find that special someone.

Kevin Chembleski, 34, a straight guy from L.A., didn't have sex for a year after seroconverting and still avoids casual sex. "I told a woman I didn't know very well. She freaked. She kept saying, 'I

can’t believe I was about to have sex with you!’” he says. For Jonathan Hammond, 25, it boils down to a simple equation: “You learn what’s worth a T cell and what’s not. For me, the drama in my head isn’t worth the trauma on my body.”

That sounds noble and good and Joan of Arcadia, but you can’t feed “skin hunger” with a pint of Ben & Jerry’s. Says author Mancilla, “You have to define a fulfilling sexual life for yourself. For some it’s lots of casual sex; for others it’ll mean the opposite. But you can’t let yourself be immobilized by fear.”

Dating

Sex, sex, sex—doesn’t anyone date before hopping in the sack anymore? The answer is an ear-splitting yes for many HIVers who unload their status over candlelit Chianti or long walks in the park. But disclosing in the first flush of love can be a heartbreaker. Deneen Robinson, 37, an African-American lesbian educator at Georgia’s Black AIDS Institute, always tells on the first date, despite some Twilight Zone responses. Once, before identifying as a lesbian, she met a man who fell instantly in love with her. He spent $500 in airfare to visit—then hopped the first plane back when she disclosed. His parting words? “If I touch you, I might give it to my daughter.” Deneen slid to the floor. “I cried like a baby. I called my mom and told her I felt like I was the worst thing since the Bubonic Plague.” Men.

Bart, 18, a freshman at Arizona University, logs a few more romantic evenings than Deneen. Bart’s policy sprang from a searing memory. Last year, when he was a senior in high school, his teacher asked, “Who would refuse to date someone with HIV?” Twenty-nine of the30 students raised their hands—including Bart. “I didn’t know I was infected,” he says. “Looking back, I’m horrified. I was saying even I wouldn’t date me.” Bart wants to be considered marriage—not radioactive—material, so until the time is right, he’d rather omit than admit. “If I tell them after a few dates they won’t go, ‘Ew, ew, ew!’” he says. “They’ll go, ‘Oh, it’s Bart.’ They’ll see me as what I am rather than what I have.” Another reason for Bart’s hesitancy may be his recent diagnosis. Many newbies keep their status quiet until they’ve marshaled their positive power.

Horny ol’ Esteban dated a “keeper” several times before telling him he was positive. The rejection still stings: “I’m not dating anyone I have to bury.”Esteban burst into tears. “I felt like damaged goods,” he recalls. “But then I got mad. I realized I should have said to him, ‘Couples don’t die simultaneously, you ass. Positive or negative, somebody’s burying somebody.’”

Despite the emotional roulette, psychologist Odets endorses the First Date Strategy. “Overall, I’d say it’s less problematic,” he says. “The longer the relationship goes on, the harder disclosure becomes—for both partners.” First, third or twelfth date, you’ve got to follow your gut. Sometimes you get a Meg Ryan moment: Steve, a white 36 year old from Dallas, disclosed to a guy he dated twice and the dreamboat replied, “Fine, but what are you cooking me for breakfast in the morning?”

You could also get a Woody Allen moment: Disclosing to a neg guy or gal who isn’t scared off can be as anxiety provoking as disclosing to one who is—because the conversation ain’t over: “Once

people disclose, it's just not talked about. It becomes the elephant in the room," says psychotherapist Shernoff. "But there's a lot of work to be done for [serostatus] not to be the defining dynamic. You need to have an ongoing conversation, whether it's discussing viral load tests or watching Angels in America together."

Serious Relationships

If there's one disclosure strategy that nearly everyone trashes, it's waiting months into a relationship to tell all. Sheryl Johnson, 54, a straight African American who got HIV from a guy on the "down low," dated a man for eight months—without having sex—before disclosing. His reaction stunned her. "If you'd told me after we had sex," he said, "I would've been able to cope better." Sheryl was confused. "Sex would have made it easier for me to stay," he explained.He told Sheryl he needed a cigarette and grabbed his jacket. She heard the car start—and never saw him again. Sheryl recovered by channeling her pain into poetry. That jibes with Moss of SisterLove's advice that women do "self exploration and work on their self esteem" so they can handle these situations, and tell men "what's what."

But HIVers can split, too. Mark from Detroit tells a story about Stan, a guy who came to his HIV support group because he didn't have the nerve to disclose to his lover, even though the two had been living together for months. Stan was so afraid of his partner's reaction that he broke it off. Some time later, Stan's lover walked into the same HIV support group, thinking he'd been "divorced" because Stan suspected him of being positive. The ass-kicking end of the story? These two ex-lovers found out about each other's positive status when they showed up at the same meeting. Relationships can't withstand such secrecy—and neither can your health. One of Moss' clients won't tell her long-term man she's positive because "he'll put me out the house," Moss says. "I'm working on her to tell somebody. She looks tired all the time. It's not the meds. It's the emotional strain."

Accentuating the Positive

Many HIVers are making sure their next Valentine is a member of the club. Disclosing to someone who's been there, done that can increase the likelihood of him or her doing you. Ft. Lauderdale resident Jake loves bathhouses, orgies and sex parties. With few exceptions, he won't have sex with negative guys because he doesn't want to use condoms. "I have a life-threatening virus in my body," he says, "and I choose not to unleash it on anyone else. I'm Edward Scissorhands trying not to stab someone."

It's been seven years since white, 43-year-old New Yorker Anthony said the words "I'm HIV positive." He meets sex partners online, where his profile broadcasts his status. Anthony likes to get banged like a screen door in a hurricane, and he feels he can't do that with a negative guy. "I don't care what anybody says, you're just not going to have good sex with a negative. There is always some boundary, some line that can't be crossed." For some that "boundary" is latex. "As long as AIDS is manageable," says Luis, also from New York City, "why wear a rubber?" STDs and infection with another strain of HIV do come to mind—but we hear ya.

Russell Roberts, meanwhile, thinks he'll date only positive women if he and his current girlfriend break up. "I don't want to go through that again," he says. "I don't know how she's going to react or who she'll tell."

Psychotherapist Shernoff doesn't see anything wrong with being "viral-centric." He says it's "much like the choice negatives make when they say no to positives." Psychologist Thomason agrees but says it's "a shame—people miss out on the possibility of wonderful relationships." It disturbs doc Odets, too. "First, gay people were separated from straight people for being gay," he said, "and now we're separated from each other for being positive. It just goes to show you how emotionally destructive HIV can be."

So how can I tie up the Pandora's box of disclosure in a neat little bow, whether you're swinging single or happily attached? Advice from Buddha is in order (and isn't it always?). Asked how he braved his critics' insults and anger, Buddha replied, "If someone offers you a gift and you decline it, to whom does the gift belong?" I'm less contemplative. If someone blows a load of rejection your way, I say, spit, don't swallow.

**Some names have been changed*

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