Ed Letter

Sorting It Out

February 1, 2007 By Regan Hofmann

For most of the past decade—before my very public disclosure—I knew few other HIV positive people. It seemed unlikely back then that I'd even have the chance to couple with a same-status partner. Encountering the right man was hard enough; finding one with HIV who might also be the love of my life seemed impossible. I felt I had no option but to find and educate an HIV negative partner and then share our concerns about transmission, my potential longevity and whether or not we could have a child without putting him or the baby at risk (that was before sperm washing; even today, the practice is experimental and expensive).

Some days, I thought it would be easier to be with someone who understood the drudgery of pill taking and had wrestled, like me, with the issue of mortality. But other days, it seemed such a strange thing—to choose to be with someone simply because he was HIV positive—and I wondered if I wouldn't be happier with someone whose world was not all about HIV. Not only would he balance out my all-AIDS-all-the-time existence; if we did have a child and I didn't survive, at least he'd be around to care for it. Sure, there were moments when I fantasized about condomless sex, but as a woman, an HIV positive partner wouldn't automatically mean I could forgo the latex. There was still the issue of getting pregnant: Chucking the condoms meant swallowing the pill or using alternate forms of birth control. And I still needed to protect myself from other STDs or strains of HIV that might be resistant to the drugs I'm taking (as research on reinfection/superinfection continues, I don't want to take any chances).

I had heard of the term "serosorting," the practice of having sex only with partners of the same HIV status whether positive or negative. People serosort for many reasons—so they can bareback with reduced risk, for example. But there are other motives, as you will read in this month's feature story. Recently, the term has been redefined to refer to the broader notion of selecting your partner based on his or her serostatus. It turns out I'd been doing it all along. To me, the best part of serosorting—and the reason health departments are considering promoting it as a prevention tactic—is that it gets people talking about their HIV status before sex. In the end, it's all about personal choice, but informed choice is much better than risking your life without knowing the facts.

I hear many young HIV negative people, particularly in the gay community, say they would not have sex with a positive person. I ask them how they know a person is negative. They say they ask

them. I remind them that unless you've seen the results of someone's recent HIV test, you can't be sure of their status. Even then, those with a current negative HIV test who have been exposed recently may have yet to seroconvert. People are probably safer having safe sex with someone they know is HIV positive than having unsafe sex with a partner of unknown status. If nothing else, a frank conversation with potential lovers about serostatus is bound to flush out their character, preferences and intentions. And while I'm not totally buying that "safer sex is sexier sex," I will say that sex with someone who's been honest and up-front about their status—and yours—irrespective of whether you are both positive or both negative or serodiscordant can be very sexy indeed. When worries of transmission have been managed, whether through using condoms, serosorting or both, we can focus instead on the pursuit of pleasure.

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