Editor’s Letter

Up Close and Personal

July 1, 2006 By Regan Hofmann

When they told me I had HIV, my first question was how long I would live. My second question was whether or not I could ever have sex again. Until that moment, I didn’t realize how important sex was to me. It had always been a natural by-product of a relationship and, yes, part of why I looked for a partner in the first place. But I hadn’t considered it a big focus of my life until I thought about being forever banned from the bedroom. Thinking of a life without sex meant much more than a loss of pleasure; it was also about a loss of acceptance, of being wanted, of being held. For those of us with HIV, finding ourselves held tightly in someone’s arms can be especially wonderful medicine—which is why we decided to dedicate this month’s issue to sex, sharing your answers to our questions about your own choices when it comes to sex and helping you to understand how you can protect yourself—legally—through disclosure.

In the first years following my diagnosis, sex with HIV wasn’t exactly dreamy. I struggled with the issue of disclosure and the seemingly interminable wait for my partner to decide whether (or not) I was worth the risk. If a potential lover agreed to get up close and personal, the specter of HIV hovered annoyingly above the sheets the first few times we’d have sex. Then, there were the occasional scares (malfunctioning condoms, moments of nearly getting carried away) and the very unsexy regular checkups and HIV tests for my partners.

But a funny thing happened over a decade of dealing with sex and HIV. Sex with HIV evolved from something I wish I never had to experience to an experience enriched by the hardship that led to it being safer. Sex with HIV was so enriched, in fact, that I almost wouldn’t trade it for sex without HIV (though, trust me, I’d happily kiss the whole condom thing good-bye). HIV protects me as well as any condom against casual Casanovas and helps me figure out pretty quickly others’ true intentions. It’s never fun to face rejection because of your HIV status. But the act of disclosure (once people get over the shock) often leads to respect (for my courage to speak up), gratitude (for my willingness to expose myself in the name of someone else’s personal safety) and appreciation (for my willingness to continue to aspire to a normal love life despite HIV’s restrictions).

Telling a partner your status, and the conversations that follow, can lead to a level of intimacy that’s often as satisfying as full-on naked entanglement. There can be great power in openly addressing a topic so tainted with taboo. Indeed, disclosure has become especially charged today,

as prosecutors criminalize those who don’t disclose their status to partners before having sex. (Did you know you could go to jail for not disclosing before exposing someone to HIV?)

Years ago, if someone had asked me to identify the sexiest thing about a man, I would have highlighted an aspect of his anatomy. Having lived a decade with HIV, my perspective has changed. The sexiest thing in the world to me now is when someone is totally truthful with me. And, in turn, when they hear my truth—and are not afraid.

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