Mentors

September 1, 2005 By Nick Burns

The Rookie: Mario Brito
34, Queens, New York
Diagnosed 2003

Q: “Would it be easier to date a person who has HIV?”

The Veteran: Jesús Aguais
38, New York City
Diagnosed 1988

A: “You need more in common than just HIV to make a relationship last.”

Mario: What’s been your most difficult experience with disclosure?

Jesús: The hardest one was to myself. I come from a different era. In the ’80s, the stigma was so great—I was 21. I only heard about AIDS on TV. It was like the Martians coming. You’d see pictures and wonder if it’s real. I didn’t know anyone with AIDS then, and so I lived in denial for a long time. It wasn’t until I moved to the U.S. in 1989 that I finally came out about my status.

Mario: I moved to the U.S. from Ecuador in 1991 to be free. In my country, it was difficult to be gay. I didn’t come out to my family about being gay until I moved to the U.S. After my diagnosis, I came out a second time.

Jesús: What has been your experience with disclosure?

Mario: When you disclose, people look at you differently—all they see is your HIV status. Guys will say they can handle it, but then they don’t. I don’t think that I can find a negative guy who will understand.

Jesús: It’s not that they’re rejecting you; they’re facing their own fears—that’s why people run away. When you’re dating, tell him right away before you get attached. If you tell him and he runs away, you’re saving yourself a lot of headaches. If he stays, hold his hand and give him the education he needs.

Mario: But the rejection is hard. I can think of five situations when guys have told me that they can handle it, but then they'll change. In the beginning, a guy will be affectionate and call every day—but then you tell him you're positive and it all stops. Wouldn't it be easier to date another positive guy?

Jesús: I don't think that relationships can be based on HIV. You need things in common—and not just your status. Sure, when you base relationships on HIV, you can have more comfortable sex, because you don't have to worry as much about infecting someone else. You can relate and go to support groups together. But once that relationship continues, you'll need more in common than just HIV to make a relationship last.

Mario: When I was HIV negative, I dated positive guys. When they told me in the beginning, I valued their honesty. Now, it's a role reversal, and I'm the one disclosing.

Jesús: Right, you are the caring and honest person, and that's what you need: a boyfriend who values those same things. If you find a wonderful HIV positive person, good for you—but you can find a wonderful negative person, too. It's hard to find a relationship if you're gay—positive or not. And we assume that people don't want to have a relationship with us because we are positive.

Mario: After 17 years, is disclosure easier?

Jesús: Well, I don't have to tell people anymore. I think I went to another level. I feel like I am so open about my HIV status that I don't need to disclose anymore. And when I talk about my T cells or something and I see someone react to it, I'm surprised they didn't already know.

Mario: I didn't know you were positive when we first met at St. Vincent's Hospital after my diagnosis. You were the counselor who told me how to take my meds. Months later, I saw an article about your organization, Aid for AIDS, and found out your HIV status.

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