# Relapse: Don’t Do It

Advice from an AIDS educator who knows

October 1, 1995 By Frank Trejo

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Exuding confidence, Jerry Calumn rattles off statistics, cites studies and points to simplified drawings of antibodies, T-cells and, of course, the virus. It’s another “AIDS 101” class at Dallas’ AIDS Resource Center, and Calumn, a native of Dallas who graduated from Texas Tech with a degree in marketing, jokes that he now sells safer sex. As education manager at the center, he laughs, pushes and cajoles his charges with unbridled enthusiasm. At times he seems to be bursting at the seams, straining nearly as much as the T-shirt that barely contains the muscles of his chest and arms.

But then, as the moment of truth arrives, Calumn’s smiling eyes steel themselves, he takes a barely detectable breath and plunges on. Tossing a transparency on the overhead projector, the 29-year-old starts describing the HIV antibody test behind the positive report on the screen. And then adds: “I’m not violating anyone’s confidentiality here. These are my test results.”

It’s been more than a year since Calumn got those test results, and these days he marvels at how far he’s come. “In many ways, I’m happy with the insight that it has brought me, but I’m riding the same HIV rollercoaster as anybody who’s positive,” Calumn says. And a major part of that ride is admitting that even though he has been on staff at the AIDS Resource Center for the past five years he nonetheless took part in an act of unprotected sex in March 1994.

There was a time Calumn considered himself “this model HIV negative, sexually active gay man.” Today he personifies the relapsed gay man: One who knows about safer sex yet fails on at least one occasion to practice it.

For an experienced AIDS educator, it has not been an easy role to accept. For much of the past year, Calumn says he has been gripped by two distinct and contradictory emotions. On one hand, he feared that he would no longer be an effective educator. He questioned whether anyone would listen to a safer sex message from someone who had failed to practice it. But on the other hand, he feels it’s made him a better educator, who now speaks from the heart. “It doesn’t matter how much you know, who you are, who you’re married to or whether you go to church or not: Anybody can be positive and I’m perfect proof,” Calumn says.

After his diagnosis, Calumn overcame the shattering news and his fears about its effect on his work as an educator, and decided to go public, very public, about his situation. In a series of

articles in the center's newsletter, he detailed the circumstances that led to his relapse. And then he granted interviews to the local gay and mainstream press.

Calumn decided to come out publicly about his HIV status because of what he saw and heard last year at a national conference in Dallas on continuing HIV infections among gays, bisexuals and lesbians. During three days of discussion, several men mentioned that relapse had crossed their minds, but none admitted to it. "There wasn't anybody that stood up and said, 'I became positive because I relapsed and this is what it feels like,'" Calumn says. "It was the big, white elephant in the room that nobody wanted to admit to. That just really made it clear that I had to stand up and say it can happen and it can happen from one slip."

It usually takes people in his education classes 20 to 30 minutes before somebody finally asks: How is it that an AIDS educator has just tested positive, even though he's been teaching about safer sex for years?

"I tell them that knowledge alone doesn't do it. You have to exercise that knowledge every time," Calumn says. "Then I usually talk about my particular situation." Calumn says it was clinical depression -- diagnosed after his positive test result and brought on by personal and work situations -- that contributed to his risky behavior. And he said he was perfectly aware of what was happening. "Alarms were going off. I wasn't drunk. I wasn't stoned. I wasn't anything," Calumn says. "I just said, 'You know, there is just too much pain. There's just too much going on. I don't care. I don't care about living in this world.'"

These days relapse is the primary concern of AIDS educators trying to reach gay men. "Relapse has changed our message," Calumn says. "It's no longer just information. We had to begin talking about life skills and intimacy and taking care of each other." The AIDS Resource Center started an outreach program to HIV negative men earlier this year. It includes a workshop on developing intimacy and communication skills.

HIV has helped Calumn face his depression and recognize other aspects of his life that needed changing, such as allowing people he cared about to really be closer to him. "I think knocking down these walls of isolation helped me to feel more. I hope that it won't take HIV for other people to get diagnosed for depression or bring down their barriers," Calumn says. "I could have learned this without HIV. I wish I had."

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