Relaxed Security

When a boyfriend tells friends her status, anonymous rethinks the importance of staying, well, anonymous.

January 1, 2006 By Anonymous Staff

My boyfriend of a year raked his fingers nervously through his thick blond hair. “I’m really sorry,” he said. “We were just hanging out, eating wings, and it sorta came out.” When I looked at him quizzically, he added: “I told Bill and Steve that you have HIV.”

We had discussed how hard I’ve worked to keep my status secret in my small rural New Jersey town. Even though his two best friends live in New York City, I was paranoid. Every new person who knows increases the odds of my secret leaking out. And if he’d told them without asking me, who else had he—or would he—tell? I had every right to explode. And I could tell he was waiting for my outburst. But I hesitated.

Five years ago, when an ex-boyfriend disclosed my status to his mom without asking, I went all Mount St. Helens on him. Objects were hurled. I felt betrayed, wildly out of control, defenseless. I wanted desperately to call her and have a chance to give her my version of the story so she would know I’m not a bad person. But I was also afraid of the negative feedback I was sure a woman protecting her son would send my way. I never called.

This most recent confession coincided with the ten-year anniversary of my diagnosis. After that life-changing doctor’s appointment, I lived in silence for three months until I couldn’t take it anymore and blurted out, “I have HIV,” at the end of one of my mother’s weekend visits. If I’ve learned anything in a decade of coexisting with the virus, it’s that people need to talk to others about the disease and that you can’t always control when that will be. I knew my boyfriend would eventually have to share what he was facing with someone close to him—I had just thought he’d tell me first.

I’ve come a long way—and the telling, once nearly impossible, has gotten much easier. Lately, something strange has happened. It’s getting hard to keep quiet. The other day, I nearly whipped out my pills and slammed them back in front of a friend who has no idea about my status. I never thought I’d have trouble keeping my own mouth shut about HIV.

It’s not that I don’t care—I am still largely undisclosed, including in this column—it’s just, well, I don’t know. Maybe it’s Secrecy Fatigue. Maybe I’m just sick and tired of watching myself like a

hawk lest I slip up and people find out. Maybe I’m tired of living like a spy, squirreling away my pills into secret chambers or sticking them in my socks and praying they don’t melt when I go out dancing, of dashing to the mailbox to retrieve my carefully wrapped copy of POZ before my landlord gets there, of inventing other mysterious afflictions so that my coworkers don’t question my frequent doctor’s visits. Or maybe it’s because after all these years, I’ve finally been able to change my attitude toward HIV. Where once I felt only shame and disgust at myself, I now feel forgiveness and compassion. I’m finally OK that I have HIV, so I care less whether other people are OK with it.

And so I calmly asked my boyfriend, “What’d they say?”

He exhaled and replied, “They said they were really sorry you had it and wouldn’t tell a soul.” I’m not sure I believed him, but I knew I’d be OK even if they let it slip, and then I gave him a big hug.

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