Shock and Blah

Anonymous discloses to a devastated response—her own

October 1, 2003 By Anonymous Staff

In the seven years since my HIV diagnosis, I had never told a female friend—not because I thought it would be difficult, but because my worry over burdening them outweighed my need for their support.

Recently, though, I realized it was something I *did* need. The thought of telling a girlfriend gave me no *agita*. What could be so hard about it? Her irises wouldn't flash with panic as her mind did a *Matrix*-worthy scan of every second of physical contact between us, worrying that she was now host to my virulent little friend. She wouldn't begrudge a lifetime of latex-laden sex, wouldn't be dismayed that we'd never have children—or that if we did, the baby might be positive, or that I'd die early, leaving her to care for the baby solo. Since she was less vested in my life than, say, a lover or family member, her reaction was sure to be less dramatic. Right?

Right. That turned out to be the problem.

It took me a long time to decide who to confide in. Everyone I tell tells at least one other person even though they swear they won't. It used to upset me, but now I understand that talking with someone else helps them come to terms with my HIV faster. So I tell people that it'sOK to spread the word as long as they tell someone who can keep a secret, then tell me whom they've told.

Rolling through my Rolodex of possible confidants, I thought about how gossip is a cherished currency among chicks. Who could resist wielding the gold bullion of the news that I have HIV? I identified three friends who I thought could (basically) keep my secret. They didn't know one another. Two were married—they were likely to tell their husbands, who were both very tight-lipped—and one was single, but incredibly discreet. I broke the tie by thinking about how they might react.

Susan would likely be devastated. There would be crying and sadness and fear and a lasting melancholy. She would write poems about it. Beth would be brusque and focused on the direct role she would have in my survival. She would chide me for not telling her at the time of my diagnosis. Lori who had been a professional cheerleader, would show just the right mix of compassion and strength. She would not cry nor be angry. She would treat me just the same as she always had.

Which is exactly what she did. I told her over a salad at our local pizza hangout, using the usual spiel: “I have something to tell you that may be difficult to hear. I have HIV.” She barely paused her chewing. In fact, she nodded while continuing to chew, to recognize she’d heard me. I couldn’t believe it. Had the tables been reversed, I’d be spitting my mesclun out onto the table in shock. *This is big news!,* I wanted to yell. *You know—AIDS!? The global plague!?*I consoled my disappointment in her nonchalance by viewing it as a front for her internally exploding self. Yet, as she asked questions—“Jeez, how’d you get it?” (heterosexual sex); “Does your family know?” (yes); “Can you still have sex, a baby?” (yes, who knows); and “What are you doing about it?” (I gave her HIV-care 101and showed her my arsenal of pills)—her incredible calm made me strangely angry.

What was wrong with me? Wasn’t this what I’d dreamed of? Being able totell someone that I had HIV without producing horror and shock?

In theory, yes. Though I’d gotten pretty thick-skinned about people’s reactions, I had desperately wished for a day when I didn’t have to brace myself for the telling. Perhaps in some twisted way I felt deprived of my chance to display my hard-earned strength and dignity in the face of a dramatic response. It gave me a weird high; I felt invincible when I stayed strong in the face of others’ crumbling.

I thought Lori might get back to me with a delayed reaction that would allow me my moment of glory—but in the week that followed my disclosure, I saw her several times at the stables where we ride together, and she never referenced the giant bomb I’d dropped on her.There were no proverbial char marks, no missing limbs. When I could no longer stand it, I said, “Hey Lori, thanks for being so cool about,well, you know…” She touched my arm gently and said, “Hey, it meant a lot that you trusted me.”

The following weekend, I chopped my long blond hair to the bottom of my chin and dyed it lacquer black. When people asked me why I’d done it, I said I was just ready for a change. On reflection, though, I think it had to do with the rush of producing a dramatic response. Lori, by the way, did react to my new hair. With due horror.

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