The Blame Game

It’s hard to move forward after your diagnosis if you’re weighed down by anger at the person who infected you. Rookie Rick Witherspoon asks veteran David Brown how to leave the blame behind.

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Rick: The person who infected me got tested with me at the beginning of our relationship. I tested negative, and he told me that he’d come up negative too. I later found out that he had lied; he’d been positive for at least four years. When I confronted him, he denied it; but a couple of days later, he slipped up and said something that made it clear he’d known all along. I confronted him again, and he finally admitted it. I know that time supposedly heals all things, but I’m still angry.

David: You have been hit by one of the most serious and sobering events that anyone can face in life. It’s normal to be angry. You have to be patient—it takes a very long time to get past something like that. I found out 16 years ago. Today, I don’t even think about the person who I think might have infected me—it’s not healthy.

Rick: When I first found out, I wanted revenge. I wanted him to feel the pain that he had put me through and take everything that he had. I went to a lawyer because I knew that in Virginia, as in many states, it’s illegal to willingly expose your partner to HIV. But my lawyer and I decided it would be more of a hassle than it was worth to take my ex to court. I was raised to believe that you have to forgive those who hurt you in order to move on. But that pisses me off. Why should I have to forgive him for what he did?

David: I don’t think you have to. Wrestling with the idea that you’re supposed to forgive him is taking up too much time in your life. Forgiving and forgetting are two different issues. You needed to be angry for a while and do whatever you could in order to survive. But it’s time to say, “OK, now I have to figure out what to do with this.”

Rick: I’m having to learn how to forgive and trust myself. That’s the hardest thing. When do you learn to trust yourself again, and when do you learn to trust somebody else?

David: With something like this, it takes a long time to trust someone else. I think you can learn to trust and forgive yourself earlier. But remember, it’s an ongoing process. I’m 55, and I’m still unlocking a few doors that I thought I was never going to have to again.

Rick: How do you rebuild trust in yourself?

David: You take responsibility for your own actions, and you build from that. You pick and choose who you surround yourself with. Don't choose angry people or people who are always looking for somebody else to blame. You have to decide for yourself that you have the inner strength and desire to rise above it.

Rick: I still avoid certain places because I'm scared I might see him. I feel the anger well up sometimes, and I wonder if I am going to be able to control myself. I'm looking forward to the day I can walk into a place and not look over my shoulder and do a crowd check. I have allowed him to have that much power over me.

David: I think that's OK. You have to have the power to protect yourself. Your instinct is telling you to make sure that wherever you are, it's a safe place. One day, you'll walk into a strange place and not look over your shoulder—and you won't even know that you haven't done it.

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