The Lying Game

For HIVers who tell fibs about their status to get others into bed, therapist Patrick Califa reads between the lies

July 1, 2002 By Patrick Califia

Dear Sexpert:

Last year I spent six months in San Francisco studying massage. I fell into the habit of telling sex partners (when asked, which wasn't often) that I was negative, although I've had HIV for 16 years. How do I justify this? First, I always use condoms when fucking negative guys (I'm mostly a bottom anyway). Second, I have been rejected too many times to expect the object of my lust of love to cross the serostatus chasm. Am I proud of myself? No. Do I feel guilty? Not very. My problem: The guy I was dating in San Francisco, who is negative and believes he has never slept with a positive guy, is coming to visit me in New York City, where many people know me as an HIV positive AIDS activist. I can hide my meds, I might be able to enlist a friend or two in the deceit, but I'm beginning to feel that this deception—or maybe this relationship—has gone too far. Do you think I am...

—Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know

Dear More-Mad-Than-Bad:

It would be easy to get self-righteous and holler at you to mend your ways or threaten you with the fact that in 31 states (New York is not one; California is) "Don't Tell = Go to Jail." Very few people (even bottoms) like to be obedient. So my mantra as a sex-positive diva shrink is, "Don't judge, don't threaten and don't hate."

But that doesn't mean you are entirely off the hook. My own philosophy is that adults should ask every sex partner about potential health problems and volunteer their own messy medical data. Many people with permanent contagious illnesses feel that so long as they try to prevent transmission, their diagnosis is nobody's business. And certainly in the old days of AIDS, before testing was widespread, the drill was "Protect yourself"—but that was never intended to give you license to lie to your partners. What would you think of a guy who told his girlfriend he'd had a vasectomy when he hadn't? Would putting on a condom make that OK? Surviving the miseries of puberty does not entitle you to an orgasm. And no same person wants to live in a world of only predators and prey!

You did everything you thought was necessary to protect your West Coast Sweetie with the

Wondrous Wienie as well as all the lesser lights of your lust. But there's more at stake here than HIV transmission. What about informed consent? What about another man's right to follow his own rules about sexual risk-taking? Whether to reveal or conceal is finally a moral question. So, nose up, Pinocchio—you need to decide whether lying truly is your ethical code or whether you'd rather turn up the volume on Jiminy Cricket.

Whether your geographically undesirable squeeze leaves you or continues to date you, he is likely to be heartbroken when he learns that he lied about such an important issue. I doubt that his immediate response will be to thank you for not fucking him raw. But wait—you said you were afraid that the relationship, not just the deception, had gone too far. What the dickens is that about? You've set yourself up for him to reject you ("just like all the others"). Have you bought into the idea that you are not worthy? Is the thought of loving someone so painful that you'd rather be single?

Your attempt to take a holiday from HIV by "pretending" you are negative is a warning that you're feeling overwhelmed. Being pushed away when in a state of sexual needs is a shaming experience. And shame is a scalding emotion that attacks your very right to exist. No wonder you fantasize that you're a guy who doesn't have to worry about rejection. But have you ever tried to unpack the bulging suitcase of emotions that arrived along with your test results or to heal from the hammering that your soul takes as you deal daily with stigma and mortality? You might be enraged at being expected to protect other people from this virus when the sad truth is that somebody gave it to you. Why should you expected to give up pleasure because of another man's ignorance or fear?

Improved knowledge about how this disease is transmitted has sharpened the condemnation of people who seroconvert, and better treatments for AIDS have made expressions of terror, grief or anger unwelcome. Positive people are supposed to be blithely climbing mountains or industriously counting their pills and not bothering anybody. Well, un-screw that, I say. Make some noise. Ask for help. Join a support group for positive guys and hook up with an experienced therapist. You gotta uncover those wounds before you can bandage 'em up, hon.

At a loss in love or list? Ask the POZ Sexpert, 1 Little W. 12th St., 6th Floor, New York, NY 10014, or e-mail sexpert@poz.com

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