To Kiss and Tell

Our intrepid shrink, Patrick Califia, puts three disclosure doozies on the couch

April 1, 2003 By Patrick Califia

Dear Sexpert,

I found out I was positive here in prison. The so-called doctor just said, "You have AIDS. You are going to die," and left me to deal. The woman in my life says she loves me and will be there for me when I'm released. But now when she visits, she won't kiss me. I've told her HIV isn't spread by kissing, but she must not believe me. The thought of never being able to kiss her again is torture. Is she on her way out of my life no matter what she says?

--In Despair

Dear ID,
I'll get to your question as soon as I get over the foul way you received your diagnosis. I wish your partner were talking about filing a complaint against the prison. She could be advocating for your medical care instead of obsessing about intertwining tongues.

Now, about your problem. When people refuse to perform a sex act with someone who has HIV, there are three likely reasons: 1) it's something they don't do with anybody, 2) they're afraid of getting HIV, or 3) they're pissed off or scared about something else. Since you've already smooched up a storm, you know it's not 1). As for 2), maybe she doesn't want to take your word on how HIV enters the body. Encourage her to talk to her doctor or call a local AIDS service organization for more information. The experts will confirm that kissing is risky only if you're deep-kissing with canker sores or bleeding gums (soon after flossing or brushing, for example). Saliva is a natural antiviral.

If it's 3), be patient. She has a lot to work through—anger with you for getting sick, fear about the future, confusion about her own place in all of this. Ask her about her feelings. Listen to what she says, even if it's painful. Try to be calm and reassuring, but when you have difficult feelings of your own, tell her.

When she does call that hotline, she should ask for a referral to a support group for partners of people with HIV. Your darlin' can draw strength and knowledge from others in the same situation. If the two of you can do all this, I think she'll be ready to kiss you again, and you'll know her commitment is real. Here's to a long, happy life on the outside!

Sexpert, help! I am one half of a serodiscordant gay male couple who recently got together. Since I already told him I have HIV and we use condoms during sex, do I also have to come clean about my—ugh—herpes?

--Bugged Out

Dear BO,
Unfortunately, herpes can be transmitted (albeit rarely) in the "prodromal" stage, shortly before sores arrive. If they appear on areas of your body not wrapped in rubber, contact could expose your partner to the herpes virus. In the interest of saving both of you from such nasty surprises, add the "love bug" topic to your pillow talk. If he can, er, swallow the HIV, the herpes should be a cakewalk. And do both of you a favor: Ask doc about "suppressive" (constant) herpes therapy to prevent outbreaks.

I am a (mostly) straight single woman living holistically with AIDS. In between taking my vitamins and herbs, I try to snag a little lovin'. But I'm in a big double bind. When I tell guys on the first coffee date about my medical history, they pay for my cappuccino and hit the road with a phony promise to call soon. If I wait to tell a lover until after we've dated for a while, I'm accused of being deceitful, and there's a big dramatic breakup. Does my future hold any form of penetration more pleasurable than acupuncture?

--A Little Sugar in My Bowl

Dear Sugar,
Any man who would reject someone as fine, funny and health-conscious as you is a dumb slug. And therein lies a solution to your dilemma. The problem is not *when* you tell but *who*. Instead of fretting about your scary secret, take back your power and screen *them*. Tell a prospective trick/fuck buddy/lover you're thinking about volunteering for an AIDS service organization. If his response is "Ick! Why are you doing that?" you can pay for your own latte and leave. But if he says, "That's interesting. Tell me more," he can probably be brought along (with some education) to prepare him for hearing about your status.

Better yet, start looking for love in all the right places. Where can you hook up with men who are politically progressive? Is there a church in your area that provides social services for HIVers? A group that tries to improve conditions for prisoners? There's usually a wealth of passion beneath all those PC impulses. The women who do AIDS activism are often worth a flirt, too. Spread your net wisely and often, and I'm sure you'll find a catch worth spreading your legs for. Blessings on your quest for an open-minded, studly boy or girl.

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

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