Peer Recovery

Luis Viera, a graduate of the Peer Recovery Education Program at The Alliance for Positive Change, testifies about living with HIV in an opinion piece titled "From Caterpillar to Butterfly." Below is an edited excerpt.

March 29, 2021 By Luis Viera

Luis Viera graduating from peer trainingCourtesy of Luis Viera

In 2010, I tested HIV positive. From that moment, my world collapsed. My new reality became even worse when, at the beginning of 2011, I got a call to start treatment, but that wasn't all—my

diagnosis was AIDS.

I'd only been in New York City from Puerto Rico a short time. It was difficult to face all this without my family close by, without support, without a job and without a home. For weeks, I slept in train stations, until a person offered me his hand and his support.

After a few months staying in shelters, I began to realize that the process of understanding and accepting my status was harder than anything in my life.

I faced stigma and marginalization, not only for being HIV positive but also for being a homeless gay Latino. I went through so many agencies and organizations that I felt like just another number, a statistic, just one more client.

I felt disappointed and scared, and I relapsed to behaviors that took me even further into depression, anxiety and panic attacks. I thought I would never get the chance to find myself again. I knew I needed to go back to therapy and start taking my mental health meds again, but I also knew it would be harder than the first time.

I finally got the courage to try, and I decided to look for health coverage that really met my needs as an HIV-positive person with mental health issues. It was then that I was linked to The Alliance for Positive Change.

There, I learned how HIV affects me emotionally, physically and socially as well as the importance of staying physically and mentally healthy. I was truly motivated to seek more spaces where I could develop as a human being and learn the skills I need to reach out and help others facing the same challenges as me.

I then learned about the organization's peer training. During the five-week program, a healing process took place, and I saw in my classmates the same need to understand and validate others, respect their experiences and value their opinions.

I could see that I wasn't alone and that I could take control of who I was regardless of external factors that might try to bring me down. Every day, I had the opportunity to learn how actively listening and analyzing valuable information would help me take control of my health, my body and my life.

I learned how to communicate clearly, with tolerance and without judgment. I also learned the importance of knowing the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections if we do not practice safer sex. I found that knowing myself could help me empower others.

I learned the importance of setting personal and professional boundaries, recognizing the five stages of change, understanding the meaning of harm reduction, managing stress, healthy eating habits, self-esteem, preventing relapse and, above all, understanding and valuing the disclosure process.

The most important thing I learned is that I can do whatever it takes to help others without forgetting about self-care. Now that this step is over, I will follow the advice of my trainers and look for opportunities that can further train me to help others.

I want to be that someone who can offer assistance to that person who might now be sleeping on the train, lost, scared and lonely, like I was. This amazing journey transformed me from a caterpillar to a butterfly.

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