



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 training Courtesy 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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