



# How Pervasively Ugly Is HIV Stigma?

Paul Russell provides several examples.

June 22, 2021 By Paul Russell

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Example 1: A man who wanted to have bareback sex with me, suddenly open-mouth kissed me, interrupting my intent to inform him of my HIV status. At the end of the kiss he asked, “Are you negative?”

I informed him I’ve been healthy and undetectable since 1997. He freaked out. I patiently explained undetectable versus having a detectable viral load and included this nugget from Healthline.com: “The CDC has adopted the widely accepted position that an HIV-positive person with an undetectable viral load cannot pass the virus through unprotected sex.”

The man admitted he’d never heard the terms “undetectable” or “viral load.” He interrupted me several times saying, “I have a wife and kids,” as if I’d be responsible for his imagined ruin of them. I refrained from commenting on his bareback pursuits with men and held back from asking how he managed to sneak out of his house, leaving behind his precious wife and kids. Instead, the man abruptly walked away.

Example 2: In a conversation on the dating app Scruff that involved the tedious clichés of “What are you into?” and requests for more photos—despite providing only one himself—the last question asked for my status. Like too many users of these antisocial apps, the man didn’t read (or see) my open declaration of being undetectable in my profile. Plus, the man who listed “health care” as his occupation overlooked one of several Scruff options I listed regarding safer-sex practices. My more prominent choice was “treatment as prevention,” which is code for: “I’m positive and undetectable.”

The Scruff cruiser texted that if we were to meet, I needed to present a copy of my most recent test results and show him my HIV medication bottles. That would prove to his satisfaction that I was being truthful. After my shock wore off, I sent him a text asking that he show me his latest HIV test results because I know some people who are positive who lie about their status. Only fair to turn the tables. I doubt the Scruff cruiser realized how insensitive and demeaning his requests of me were.

Example 3: On dating apps, it’s not unusual to see these phrases in people’s profiles: “Clean only,” “HIV-free u b too,” or “Disease-free.” Each is a nasty dog whistle that people living with HIV—whether or not they are undetectable—are dirty, unworthy of social interaction and

irresponsible and thus deserve the virus and to be righteously shamed and shunned.

When I come across such phrases, I send a message with a polite awareness statement about how the individual with this vocabulary in his profile perpetuates the stigma against HIV positive folk. It's an outdated '80s way of thinking about HIV. At the end of my statement are links to articles detailing what Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U) means and to articles about how HIV-related stigma is ill-informed and outdated.

I encounter stigma privately, publicly and professionally. In my family and home life, the stigma cuts deepest. No scar will heal that mortal wound. But since I publicly declared I'm living with HIV in a televised press conference with one of my state senators, I'm determined to place stitches on the stigma wounds of others living with HIV.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Shy, blunt, confident at work

What is your greatest achievement?

I have two. My first published book *Acting: Make It Your Business*. And my 30-year partnership.

What is your greatest regret?

Not being a better student.

What keeps you up at night?

Insomnia. And/or my partner's constant tossing and turning.

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

That it never existed.

What is the best advice you ever received?

From a therapist, "Paul, not everyone is you."

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

The person(s) who don't let HIV identify who they are.

What drives you to do what you do?

Fear of failure. I failed seventh grade because I was lazy. I don't want laziness to charter my journey again.

What is your motto?

"Arrogance is a close relative to ignorance."

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

I'd cheat. I'd grab three items. I'd grab my cats, and my laptop.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A panda because no one hates pandas.

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<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/pervasively-ugly-hiv-stigma>