HIV Disclosure Advice From New York Times Columnist

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What's the best way to disclose an HIV-positive status to friends and colleagues? Such is the question posed to Steven Petrow, the New York Times advice columnist who tackles gay and straight etiquette in a column titled "Civil Behavior."

Timothy Rodriguez from Healdsburg, California, asks Petrow:

"I'm married to a wonderful man, 51, and have lived quite well with the virus for 15 years.... While I've never specifically hidden the fact of my serostatus, it's always been a bit of work to tell others.... What's your advice on how (or if) people who learn that they're HIV positive should tell others? (I'm not asking about dating situations.)"

In his response, Petrow immediately comes out in support of Rodriguez for disclosing his status in such a public way. But Petrow also mentions that some comments about the topic on his Facebook page amounted to saying, "You don't advertise to the world that you have diabetes or depression, so why would you disclose your HIV status."

"The way we talk about H.I.V. and AIDS often seems stuck in a time warp," the advice columnist writes, adding that those who decide to come out as HIV positive could have the unique opportunity to teach and help reverse the stigma that still surrounds the virus.

However, Petrow also concedes that for many, disclosing could be a difficult journey. "Will people see me as a criminal or a walking corpse?" asks Petrow hypothetically, and he warns that although the Americans with Disabilities Act is supposed to protect people with the virus from being fired, it doesn't always work out that way.

He adds that it's also time to stop playing the blame game with HIV--the idea that people who contract the virus today should have known better and can only blame themselves, an opinion that activist Tyler Curry says is more prevalent among millennials than baby boomers--and Petrow writes that the stigma surrounding the virus is not only unreasonable but also "bad medicine."

He advises Rodriguez to be careful and to possibly say something before he discloses, such as: "I

have some news. I feel fine about it, but want you to know." Then, to specify to the person whether or not he wants the announcement to be kept a secret.

For those receiving the news, Petrow says to "think before you speak," and he shares a few lines from "The H.I.V. Etiquette Disclosure Cheat Sheet" before opening up the floor to commenters.

The resulting dialogue offers unique perspectives about the real-life implications for coming out as HIV positive. Many commenters support HIV disclosure. POZ blogger Mark S. King writes:

"The best policy is to be patient and open to whatever response we might receive when we disclose; people are only human and sometimes respond uncomfortably. If we are invested enough in them to disclose our status, we might as well invest a little more if we need to educate them a bit. Remember: We may be their first exposure, as it were, to someone with H.I.V."

Lew Alessio, an HIV prevention and educator working in Lewiston, Maine, writes that although disclosure can be a positive step, people should proceed with caution:

"Consider waiting before telling anyone except your medical team.... Surround yourself with supportive people who do not need to receive information or explanation.... Learn all you can. You will be your best caregiver."

Many commenters also came out against disclosure, arguing that an HIV status, or any disease status, is a personal fact that does not need to be broadcast to the general public. Anonymous from California writes:

"What's the point? HIV is a heavily freighted disease, and I don't want to be part of what I believe is a futile effort to bring all people around to acceptance... My personal decision is that I don't want to be looked at differently. The only way I know how to have that freedom is not to disclose."

To read this week's full "Civil Behavior," click here.

And tell us your thoughts on the topic in the comments below.

P.S. In case any of you eagle-eye readers are wondering, the New York Times style is to include periods in H.I.V. As is explained in the Civil Behavior comments section, this is because each letter in the abbreviation arrives from a separate word (human immunodeficiency virus), unlike TB, which doesn't take periods because both letters derive from the same word: tuberculosis. At POZ, we omit the periods in both cases. Phew, glad that's settled.

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