POS OR NOT?

May 1, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

It's been a while since I've blogged (okay, it's been a really long while...) but the POZ team has been busy with a host of things, including developing a cool new stigma-busting online game with mtvU and the Kaiser Family Foundation. The game launched yesterday and it's already creating quite a stir! It's called "Pos or Not" and it's aimed at getting people to see that you can't tell who has HIV and who does not by looking at them. Our hope is that by daylighting all these amazing young people living with the virus and putting them into the mix with people who are HIV negative, people will finally realize that there's nothing "other" or "extraordinary" (in a bad way) about people living with HIV. Hopefully, this will help people understand that there is no reason to discriminate against or stigmatize those of us living with HIV.

Stigma is a barrier to so many things: getting tested, disclosing your status, accessing care, getting funding to support education, prevention, research and treatment, even getting the presidential candidates to discuss the topic of HIV/AIDS. Especially before I disclosed my status publicly, and to a degree, even afterwards, stigma has played a huge role in the decisions I've made about living with HIV. It made me run out of the hospital waiting room where I was getting labwork done when I saw people I knew. It made me leave the drugstore without getting my meds because I knew people standing in line at the pharmacy. And it made me live a life of shame, isolation and fear for nearly a decade.

What has helped me escape stigma is releasing myself from it. I have realized that I made a choice many others do every day: I had sex without a condom. The only difference is that when I made that choice, HIV was present. When others made (or make) the same choice, HIV wasn't (or isn't) there. But the fact that HIV was present when I made the same choice as almost all others on the planet doesn't make me a "bad" person. It just makes me an HIV-positive one. There is no shame in living with the disease and while I understand all too well how fear of being stigmatized makes those of us living with the virus want to sometimes hide our status, the time has certainly come for the world to have a different attitude towards people who merely harbour a retrovirus.

When people living with HIV come forward unapologetically, without shame, and speak about having HIV, it allows them to get rid of the mantle of shame some people want to place on them. Disclosing your HIV status isn't for everyone, and you have to do it when and if it's right for you. But the more of us who come forward and matter-of-factly discuss our serostatus, the more the rest of the world will be likely to understand that those living with HIV are only "extraordinary" in a good way!

I've thought a lot about how we can fight stigma...and I'm still working on developing tactics that might change the way people see those of us living with HIV/AIDS for the better. This summer, at the International AIDS Conference in Mexico City, POZ will gather some of the world's top thinkers to strategize ways we can diminish the stigma around HIV/AIDS.

In the meantime, I've come to the conclusion that one of the most impactful ways to change people's perceptions of HIV/AIDS is to introduce the wide world face-to-face to the HIV community. I think it's easier to fear, dismiss and discriminate against something, or someone, you don't know. So, in the spirit of introductions, I invite you to meet some truly extraordinary young people living with HIV and other who are not who joined this game to support those of us living with, and affected by, HIV/AIDS.

I'd love to know what you think!!!

Play the game:

If you are having trouble connecting to the game through these links, visit www.posornot.com.

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