



The Shit People Say About AIDS? [VIDEO]

February 11, 2012 By [Regan Hofmann](#)

I confess. I am totally addicted to the “Shit People Say” YouTube phenomenon. It started with “Shit Girls Say” and went wildly viral from there.

In the video below, “AIDS” is part of the “Shit Nobody Says.” (Click up above to see POZ’s own video...“Shit People Say About AIDS.”)

That AIDS is something nobody talks about is a large reason why we can’t stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. It’s not on the tips of our tongues nearly as much as it should be. Poking fun of it is one way to get the conversation started.

It happened the other night when, at a dinner party, my newly-divorced friend said she’d recently started dating. As she described her encounters with several different men another friend joked to her, “You better be careful or you’ll end up on Regan’s medications.”

At first, I was stunned. Did someone just crack an AIDS joke? At my expense?

The whole table of 10 went silent. Everyone stared at me. “Are you implying,” I said slowly, “that because I have HIV it means I was promiscuous?”

“No! No!!!,” my friend stammered, “I’m not saying that. I know you weren’t promiscuous.” She paused for an awkward breath then looked at our newly-back-on-the-market friend and said, “And I’m not saying you’re promiscuous either. I was just making a joke! I guess it wasn’t funny.”

Eager to break the uncomfortable silence and rescue her, I smiled and said, “I love that you just poked fun of HIV in front of me. Do you know how much it means that you are comfortable enough with me and the subject to do that?”

Everyone at the table sighed collectively.

I was grateful she’d done it. After all, we make fun of the Pope and Jews and virgins and blondes and people with breast cancer, Alzheimer’s disease and dwarfism so why not people with

HIV/AIDS? Part of how we de-stigmatize HIV is to stop exceptionalizing it. If we want people to treat those of us living with HIV just like everyone else, we have to stop demanding special treatment (that said, we can only do that if we offer the same rights and protections to people living with HIV/AIDS offered to people not living with HIV/AIDS). One way to make HIV/AIDS a disease just like any other? Add it to the roster of things we allow ourselves to mock.

Humor has long served as a powerful way to help us face the most difficult things in life. My friend's willingness to crack an AIDS joke suggested that AIDS can be normalized and it was a great ice breaker to a conversation that allowed me to clear up myths and inform others at the table about how you get--and don't get--HIV.

But the fact that her joke focused on promiscuity bothered me.

My friend knows a helluva lot about HIV/AIDS. She's staunchly supported me and the work POZ does to help people with HIV for years. And yet...there it was, buried deep in the subconscious mind of someone smart about HIV and not bigoted against those of us with the virus: the thought that only promiscuous people contract the virus.

I understand the instinct to connect HIV and promiscuity. It's rooted in our desire to distance ourselves from things that make us uncomfortable. The more we make that which we don't like "other" the less we have to associate that thing with ourselves. By rendering HIV a disease that only "other" kinds of people get (in this case, promiscuous), people can tell themselves that they don't have to worry about it. That it can't and therefore won't happen to them. Lots of straight people allow themselves to think HIV is a gay disease. Many white people say it's mostly a black disease. Some African Americans say it's an African disease. Older people say young people get it. Young people say it's a disease of other generations. Women say it's a man's disease. Married people say single people are at risk. And many people tell themselves that no matter what gender, sexual orientation, age or skin color makes someone more likely to contract HIV, it's ultimately the promiscuous, deviant, derelict people who get it.

Of course, none of that is true. Married, single, divorced, widowed, straight, gay, bisexual and transgender, old, young, frisky and frigid men and women of all races and ethnicity get HIV. Children and babies get HIV. I know evangelical Christians with HIV, a Texas Ranger, several Catholic priests, heroin addicts, the president of a sorority, socialites and sex workers with HIV. You get the point. Every kind of person can contract HIV.

Associating HIV only with high risk behavior gives people the excuse to say, "Well, since I don't do *that* I can't have HIV." Hence why people still contract HIV and partly why 1 in 5 Americans living with the virus doesn't know it.

It's true that certain acts are more risky than others when it comes to HIV transmission. And the more risks you take and the more often you take them the higher your overall risk. But even doing certain things once (a situation that would lead very few people to label such behavior as "risky" or to consider the person doing it "promiscuous") can put you at risk for HIV. Most people

understand that a woman can get pregnant from one act of unprotected sex. But too few people understand that HIV can spread in a single sexual encounter.

Of the many dangerous myths surrounding HIV, the misperception that you have to be promiscuous to get it is among the worst. Not only because it's not true but because one person's "promiscuous" is someone else's "prudish" and therefore the label is misleading when trying to serve as an absolute predictor of HIV risk.

It is myths, misperceptions and misinformation like the association people wrongly make between HIV and promiscuity that inspired POZ to create our "Shit People Say About AIDS" video.

We offer it up as license to laugh at the disease in the hopes of normalizing it. We hope it serves as a conduit to the life-saving truths on poz.com and hope it will lead to many a fact-filled conversation about the virus. Most of all, we hope it helps HIV/AIDS bust out of its silo of silence. Because too much death and suffering have resulted from too much silence for too long around HIV/AIDS.

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