Who to Tell?

December 6, 2010 By Anonymous

As a recently diagnosed person with HIV, I've chosen to share the news of my diagnosis with a very small number of people. Although I have received incredible support from those I've told, I'm finding myself increasingly uncomfortable with my secret, and am constantly struggling with the decision of who to tell and when to tell them.

I have always been someone who genuinely believes that relationships are founded on honesty and open discussion. I'm someone who loves to talk through my problems and reflect on my experiences with trusted friends. By keeping my diagnosis a secret (at least temporarily), from most friends and people I encounter on a daily basis, I am now censoring myself in a way that feels bizarre. Withholding information that has had a profound effect upon my life from people who are close to me, and people whose friendships I value, is a completely new concept to me.

I think the discomfort with my secret is heightened by the fact that I am a first-year graduate student, and am developing new friendships that are continuously tightened by the bonds of our common experience. There are now new people in my life who I spend eight or more hours with every day. New friends that I socialize with, study with, listen to, vent to, but who have no idea of the internal struggles I am dealing with on a daily basis.

As a result, I find myself constantly assessing and analyzing my new friendships to try to see how, when, and if I should ever reveal my status to these new people who are quickly becoming a big part of my life.

I become especially uncomfortable when these friends ask about my ex-boyfriend, or want to share stories of past or current love interests. My friends' questions are reluctantly followed by my half-truthful story full of holes. I tell a generic, "I-recently-broke-up-with-my-boyfriend-but-it-was-for-the-best" story and leave out all the details that really matter.

What's even harder is when I'm having a rough day and one of my close friends sees it in my face. When she asks me what's wrong, I blame it on some exam or other school-related stress. I force a smile to assure her I'm okay, and hope that my excuse might justify the pain in my face that I'm

trying (unsuccessfully) to hide.

While one part of me desperately wants to share what I've been going through, another part of me feels unwilling to test my new friendships in that way. As these new friendships further develop and more time passes, I am confident that I will know who and when to tell. But in the mean time, it's a strange adjustment to make. The old, pre-HIV-me would be freely swapping stories about ex-boyfriends with my new friends. Now, I hold back.

Despite my discomfort with my new self-censorship, I do believe its what is right for me at this point in my HIV journey. One of the many things this diagnosis has taught me is the value of trusting yourself and your own instincts. If my instincts are telling me that these new friendships are not ready to be tested by the news of my diagnosis, or that sharing my diagnosis with these friends would not support my healing process, it's probably because I'm right. I just hope that sooner or later, my instincts will tell me something else--that I'm ready to share the truth.

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