

First steps in disclosing and coping

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Five days after my HIV diagnosis, I was in Blantyre waiting for our university graduation ceremony. I had spent the few days after the test results weeping when I was alone and putting on a brave front and pretending all was well the rest of the time.

Two days later, I forced myself to tell Shaun my results. He was furious:

“Why are you telling me? Is it because you are blaming me? Have you not brought this infection on yourself and most likely to me by being promiscuous? Why are you insisting that I test?”

Shaun asked me all these questions and insinuated I had infected him. I was unable to say more about who I had seen during the time we had separated:

I would not dare disclose that I had had sex with someone else and had not used protection almost each and every time. I think I was at a loss for words. My Christian self was telling me I had been wayward and had gone against my culture’s views in having sex before marriage. “I was a rotten apple,” I told myself.

Clearly he too had been seeing other people and had made a girl pregnant. How I got HIV was not the issue here, I said to myself: “I had the infection, period!”



The joy of graduating, although getting there was tough with so much happening.

The more I tried to explain that each person has his or her own HIV status, and that you cannot deduce from your partner’s results that you too are infected, the more denial I got from him. Shaun said he was not having any of this and would not be testing. I watched him cringe and cry in his bed that night. I

stayed with him overnight, as I was afraid of what he might do to himself if I left.

The next day I received some good news – a letter from the University of Malawi informing me my application to the law school had been successful. I had to report for a law school entrance exam a week later. I took the exams, was successful and prepared myself to get back to school. I told myself the Zomba campus and studies would be a good distraction from the difficulties of my life.

Unfortunately for me, the infection of genital warts did not disappear as quickly as I thought it would. I kept the ointment out of sight and reach of my room mate, and applied it secretly when I was sure she was away:

This secrecy became unbearable after a while, coupled with the difficulty of hiding the fact that I was living with HIV and was going to be taking antiretroviral (ARV) treatment.

After testing HIV positive, I did a CD4 count, which indicated that I had a count of 288. At that time, it was higher than the 200 set by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as representing an AIDS diagnosis and time for treatment.

With no time to waste, the doctor gave me a prescription for ARVs. I was told to take the two-tablet combination called Triomune twice a day at the same time in the morning and evening, with a 12-hour gap in-between:

I learned that I would have to take the medication for the rest of my life. At first, remembering the course was hard. As I didn't ask what would happen to me if I failed to take a dosage, I imagined the worst.

So I moved with small packets of the pills wherever I went:

I had to come up with reasons why I had to travel to Blantyre each month.

There was no ARV dispensary in Zomba at the time and I had to travel to the Queens Hospital in Blantyre to collect my drugs. The Malawian Government was then unsure of a long-term steady supply of ARVs, so we were not allowed more than a one-month supply of drugs at each visit. Every month I came up with some reason to leave, telling my room mate a different story each time:

“Mesho, I am going to visit a sick cousin.”

“Mesho, I am going to help my aunt, who needs me for a family function.”

“Mesho, I am going to sort out some family issues in Blantyre.”

This went on for a while until Mesho and I sat down one day and talked at length about my HIV infection:

I told her out of an urgent need to let someone know what was going on with me. I felt I could die anytime and I wanted my hours, days and life on earth to have counted for something to someone.

We built a sense of solidarity, as I found out that her mother was seriously ill with a chronic condition and we were able to offer each other mutual support. Talking about it freed me up and I took my medication openly from then on.

Five weeks after testing HIV positive, I found I had lost about five kilogrammes of weight. Some days I would look at myself in the mirror and get scared:

I thought I had a few months to live. I imagined I would get skinny and die. It did not help that at this time I did not know anyone living with HIV. Also, being on campus exposed me to very stigmatising posters showing people living with HIV as prostitutes and skinny men with beer bottles in their hands. I kept telling myself I was not like any of the people on the posters and that I had not done anything 'bad'.

I sank into a deep depression and rarely pitched up for lectures or the library. A good friend, Brian, noticed the change in me and I decided to let him in on my big secret. He promised to help me out by copying cases for me when I was not at a lecture, and became a great source of comfort that I began to depend on.

Unfortunately, Brian had another path in mind. He fell in love with me and wanted us to be in a long-term relationship:

I found myself to be falling well short of love, let alone self-love, and I could not commit to him or anyone else for that matter.

Already, after months of trying to make things work, Shaun and I had mutually decided to split up permanently. I think he had a hard time dealing with my HIV status. I did not want to see him, as he was becoming a reminder of a past I wanted to forget. So we remained just casual friends.

After months of using the ointment, the genital warts cleared. I held a hand to my vaginal region and prayed every morning for the blisters to disappear. One morning I woke up and found all the blisters were gone!

I focused on school for my first year and enjoyed the challenge of studying law:

I told myself I was a natural at advocating for rights and positions that seem indefensible and would sail through law school.

But what happened next, I believe, was a plan that only God could have set for me.



Sharing was a slow journey at first: my sister, Rachel, was there for me.