



When I was a mother at 18, with my son, Mpho, at about 6 months.

My son, Mpho, a father at 19, with my grandchild, Muhle, at 10 months.



Loving me

My recipe for loving myself was to start living positively around little things.

I have developed a deep love for myself since the day I discovered that I am HIV positive:

It was on that day that I decided that I will be the first person in me.

This did not come easily to my siblings because they were so used to seeing me doing this and that for them, and all of a sudden there were limitations:

My priority was to find myself and it took me time to discover who Nombeko is exactly. Having to live again started from having to learn things I cannot change, including my father, and to stay away as much as I can from people who have treated me badly.

I had to sort out my immune system and make sure I lived longer. I symbolically chose to start taking ARVs on 16 August 2006, nine years to the day that I was raped. I wanted to give hope to myself, my loved ones and to recreate this day as a positive force in my future life.

I got to a point of letting Mpho grow on his own, without me having to live his life like many of us as parents try to do. Indeed, I am proud I have raised a man.

Yet love is very difficult especially in the times of HIV and AIDS, and it can be very hard to make

relationships work and last. I have been in and out of a number of relationships. Sometimes we broke up when I was just becoming attached to my lover and busy preparing him to understand me and my HIV status:

The funny thing is the scars stay for a long time, sometimes forever. I have experienced rejection in love several times. Mostly it is not the actual person, but the situation and all the social issues around us.

One experience was dating a guy I will call BB. We had been flirting around each other until things started heating up. He had no problem with me living with HIV, but his mother was a nightmare! She seemed to hate me with a passion, even though she had never met me. Whenever BB and his mother spoke about me, there was tension in the air.

I ended up being lucky that BB started cheating and his girlfriend said that I had no reason to be with him because of my HIV status. I grew tired of being in the middle of the two and tried hard to convince BB about us having to break up, although my love for him made this hard to do. So our split wasn't all about my HIV status, but just a reminder that relationships are just hard work!

I am in love again now and I am happy about that. It is a very long distance relationship, but I feel it really is the best for me. We both have enough time to understand each other and know what we

want in life. My man, Mthe, makes me the happiest woman alive:

We both have time to respond and raise our opinions without fears, so that when we take our relationship to another level, we will be clear about what we are getting into.

I know that I have grown and now have different ways of understanding love. I think all this comes from loving myself by accepting me and realising that there are some things I cannot change. Even though he is very supportive, I have also learnt to keep Mthe away from my life of activism. I do this as we are not together through HIV, but because we love each other.

My recipe for loving myself was to start living positively around little things:

I made sure that I acknowledged all the small things I did and achieved in everyday life. Things like being able to wake up, bath myself, dress up and, as always, turn heads with my walk!

I find it very easy to love me because I am a loving, caring and very warm person, who wants everyone around me to smile. And I know my smile is contagious.

Loving me

*Slowly I roll my beautiful body around my bed
Getting up smelling the fresh new dawn.*

*Go check the mirror and
Wow! How beautiful it is
That I have another day to let love be.
Take off my pyjamas
Feeling my senses
My brain communicating with body
My feet slowly touching the ground
Feeling the beauty of my backbone marrow moving
up and down.*

*Can the loneliness take away my pride?
By the way, can I feel lonely while
Having me all by myself?
Oh no! Simple because I'm a woman.*

*Laying my body quietly in my floor
Appreciating the loving woman I've been
For all day long.
Living the story and
Telling the story
Creating intimacy
Feeling the inside love
Creates the easiness within.*

*When facing the storms
I feel stronger than before
Because I'm so in love with me.
I am just so in love with me
Feeling happy that I can be so in love with me.*

I am proud of all the achievements I have made in my life living with HIV. You still hear people addressing us as people living with HIV with this qualification:

“Even if so and so is infected, she or he has achieved so much.”

I wish people could get away from that, but who cares anyway? HIV has shown me many things. I used to have big legs and couldn't wear boots. I would joke, saying that the virus will one day squeeze my legs and I will be able to put on a nice pair of boots. And I am wearing them right now. Before I started taking ARVs, I had a figure to die for. I took advantage of it and even took part in modelling competitions.

But I still regard myself as a girl next door, who is there when needed by the community at large and who also needs to shout when things go wrong by my side:

I am deeply humbled to have my son Mpho, because he ensures that I never forget my role as a parent. I am grateful to my boyfriend, Mthe, for allowing me to live my life, dancing with me on the way and helping me pull through it all. You are the two most important people in my life.

Life is beautiful and worth living for:

*I feel that I have a choice to live or to die with HIV.
I have chosen to live.*