

# Thinking positive

## A heterosexual man's account of diagnosis, adjustment and securing a new future

I've been asked to write an article about the kind of issues a heterosexual HIV-positive man might face or has faced in the current climate and time we live in. This is not the first time I have been asked to do this – although I have declined in the past.

The main thing I have realised about being HIV positive is that you can face different issues at different times, many of which arise from the infrastructure you have around you. This infrastructure has nothing directly to do with living with HIV as a heterosexual man, but it can have a direct effect on how you're able to cope. These factors, which can be many or few, may have a bearing on your diagnosis – in a significant way, in a small way, or not at all:

- Do you have a good job and if so is it likely to be affected by your diagnosis? If you're unemployed then is your diagnosis going to affect your chance of the work you want to do?
- Do you have supportive friends and family that you could trust with your diagnosis or are there strained and uncertain relationships that could lead you not to tell them?
- Do you have a comfortable lifestyle? Do you live in a stress-free environment at home, with your own space, or do you share a house with others – and what would happen if they found out?
- Are you in a relationship and is there a person or person(s) you have to disclose to – or are you single?
- Are you healthy or do you have other medical issues that could be compounded by HIV? Are you going to start antiretrovirals straight away, or are you going to wait?

These are just some of the questions that might occur to someone when newly diagnosed, and pretty much all of them could also apply to a woman or a homosexual. Many of the issues that may or may not impact on how we deal with our diagnosis, and subsequently with living with HIV, are fairly universal; equally, some are definitely more relevant to specific groups. However, what is clear from the list above is that your own life circumstances influence and overlay the process of dealing with HIV as a whole – and how unhelpful it can be to try and put people dealing with HIV into boxes. One thing I have learnt since my diagnosis in 2001 is that you really

shouldn't try. Everyone's experience of living with the virus is different: for some, it has had a major impact on their lives, while for others it has been a nuisance but changed little for them on a daily basis.

I fall somewhere between the two. When diagnosed I had a good job, working fairly steady nine-to-five hours in an office environment. My diagnosis was a shock but I decided not to tell my family and told almost none of my friends. I wasn't sure how I had caught the virus – but I had to get someone to test whom I had recently had unprotected sex with. This was the first issue I faced. Even though I was still reeling from my own diagnosis, ironically my biggest concern at the time was whether I had unknowingly infected someone else. Although I could have had a doctor contact them anonymously, I preferred to tell them myself. At the time I lived just outside London and am now aware that consistency of care in the NHS, especially around the time of diagnosis, is something that was not, and still isn't, how it should be. I was told first over the phone, probably at my own insistence – but nevertheless, this should have been handled more appropriately.

**'A member of staff told a family member of my condition, resulting in my whole family finding out.'**

### Support groups

For almost a year I told no one. I was single, did not embark on any attempts at a new relationship and kept myself to myself. At first it was okay, but then I became ill and spent a week in hospital. Two things went wrong there. First of all, a member of staff told a family member of my condition, resulting in my whole family finding out; and secondly, I realised I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. I felt isolated. I told one friend who I knew was bisexual so I expected her to be a little more liberal in her views. She was very supportive and told me she already had another friend who was positive who she went to a support group with – so I got some information on this group and attended a few times. While it was great to meet some other people in a similar situation and I made a few friends there, I did not feel I was spoken to as an adult by the staff. I went to a second group which was more mixed and included some gay men. I didn't have a problem with this at all and in some ways found the group better than the first one, but it lost its funding and closed. I kept in touch with a

**'Although I could have had a doctor contact them anonymously, I preferred to tell them myself.'**

few people and, until about 6 months before I decided to start medication, I dealt with it all fairly well.

My family had been supportive – they let me know they were there if I needed them but didn't intrude. Probably some 2 years after my diagnosis I started to have some real issues. Firstly, my skin became so

**'In the first couple of years, a relationship had never occurred to me, but now I was lonely.'**

bad that I didn't want to go swimming, which was my favourite hobby. Secondly, I started really getting tired and suffering from an extreme lack of energy. When I started the tablets I had (wisely) taken some time off work. The first type I went on, I didn't get on with at all, and the second settled down after a few

months, but for 6 months I was all over the place. I had a lot of problems sleeping and was getting into trouble at work.

In the end I took my boss to one side and I told him what had happened. He was a partner at the firm and the first thing he said to me was, 'I didn't know you were gay' (this was in 2005!). When I told him I wasn't, he was even more surprised – stating that he 'thought only gay men and drug addicts could get it'. To be fair to him, he took time to educate himself on the subject, too much perhaps, as he was always prompting me to read one article or another. However, the pressure was taken off at work and I became better at my job as a result, with no issues there since.

In the first couple of years after diagnosis, a relationship had never occurred to me, but now I was lonely and wanted one. After a while I was also having a lot of problems sleeping and wanted to change my medication again. My consultant told me about a group meeting where a man called Robert Fieldhouse was speaking. I went along, and

**'It was great to hear how people had overcome such difficulties and to share information with peers.'**

there were around 40 people there, one of them being someone I knew from a different group I had been to. Mr Fieldhouse was very good at giving a 'warts and all' patient's perspective on medication issues and, with his help, I was able to resolve

mine. I also went to the pub afterwards with about 20 people who had been at the meeting and ended up dating a girl from Eastern Europe for a while. It ultimately didn't go anywhere, but it made me feel human again and also made me realise that if I was to date someone who was positive, they should be someone I would date normally, someone I had other things in common with, not just our HIV.

## Swiss Study

The group that had organised this meeting was run entirely by HIV-positive facilitators, which made a

big difference for me and I went to a few more of their meetings and met a really wide range of people. Over time, I realised just how different everyone's issues can be. Some people had fallen out with all their family or friends because of their diagnosis, others had lost their jobs, and some had other issues – be they mental, physical or financial – that were just made all the worse by their HIV diagnosis. However, it was also great to hear how people had overcome such difficulties and to share information with peers. This was extremely helpful. It was here that I found out about the Swiss Study, when one person in the group talked about how this had made it easier for them to disclose to the person who is now their partner, and how they had just had a negative baby.

I read up on this further and realised how helpful it would be with my own disclosure issues. I was now on meds, doing well, undetectable and had no sexual partners ... so, armed with his information, I went and got myself one. That person turned out to be the first friend I told. We had got very close over the years and I realised one day I was in love with her. When I told her this, she told me much to my

**'It is a mistake to put us all into boxes and assume the issues we face will all be the same.'**

surprise that she was in love with me too but she had thought her bisexuality would put me off. It didn't and we got married a couple of years ago. The peer support I had and the information on the Swiss Study were major factors in overcoming the HIV issues we faced as a couple.

Compared to some, I think I have had it quite easy. My most difficult times with HIV have mostly been because of stress caused by other factors. I am not a doctor, but it seems that HIV loves stress. Some of us have a lot of things and people we can depend on in difficult times, but sadly some people have no one and nothing at all. As I am keen to reiterate, it is a mistake to put us all into boxes and assume that the issues we face will all be the same. I've also realised that it is important to give something back, so I return to the group when I can and find myself giving advice to people who are now at the stage of early diagnosis – helping them in my own way is very rewarding.

■ **Straight Talk** is a support group that operates in a social setting, for heterosexuals living with HIV. They can be contacted in confidence at:  
str8talksg@yahoo.co.uk;  
or through **Positively UK** at:  
info@positivelyuk.org

*The writer wishes to remain anonymous. However, correspondence can be sent via the Editorial team: naomi@mediscript.ltd.uk*