Stigma

I’ve never been the best at eloquently expressing difficult subjects, so I won’t start here. I was diagnosed with HIV on April 15, 2016. I remember sitting in the testing office in shock when the woman who administered the rapid test told me with her even keeled voice that I was positive. I never thought I would be that position. As a person who relies on statistics, the odds will never cease to baffle me.

Nonetheless, I was incredibly lucky. I had friends who were positive. I had a mother who worked with HIV patients. I had decided that I would not let someone’s HIV status stop me from falling in love with them. At this point, I was well versed with the current state of treatment and knew that if I was diligent with my health, I would shortly be undetectable. That means I couldn’t transmit the virus and I’d have a life expectancy on par with an average, HIV negative man. Yet, even with all the support, the emotional damage and shame was a severe burden.

I felt alone and hopeless, but I decided from the beginning that I would always be honest with people when it came to my status. The alternative meant losing a part of my morality and I felt that I had already lost enough. Through the next couple of years, I incrementally became sure of myself. I experienced mutual love and heartbreak. My ability to perform in my Master’s and PhD programs ranged dramatically depending on my emotional state, but I managed.

My most defining moment of healing occurred the day I experienced a wild infatuation for a man in Boston. He never had someone disclose to him before and shortly after stopped communicating with me. It hurt more than anything else before, because I realized that disclosing my status in other cities would be more challenging. When I talked to my friend about it, he mentioned something that helped more than anything else. He said to me:

“How do you know he rejected you because of your status. How do you know he didn’t like you because of something else?”

Fair enough. As I laughed at myself, I realized that was exactly what I needed to hear. I was placing so much importance on my status when there was so much more at play to who I am as a person. Afterwards, I reminded myself that I was no danger or burden to anyone and that I was healthy. If someone was uncomfortable, it couldn’t be helped. They were on their journey and it shouldn’t have made me feel poorly about mine.

Today, I’m happy that I’m HIV positive. I’m happy because I’ve never felt more secure about who I am as a person. I’ve also been able to empathize with and support friends. Yet my disquieted concern is for those who aren’t supported. I’ve heard too many stories of individuals denying their diagnosis to the point of physical calamity. This is 2019, not the 1980’s. This is not the time of the US AIDs epidemic. What kind of world do we live in when the medication needed to keep a person healthy is rejected because of shame? The stigma of HIV is literally killing people. I’ll say that again. The stigma of HIV is killing people. I’m writing today for the newly diagnosed. I’m writing for the ones who feel lonely and ashamed.

I want you to know that you are strong and smart and talented. You are lovable. I hope what I had to say can help heal your heart just a little more than if I had remained silent.

You are not alone.