



European
AIDS Treatment
Group



Handling Mental Health and living with HIV

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Handling Mental Health and living with HIV

I started realizing I was struggling with my mental health when, posing a simple question to most of my friends and acquaintances, I started getting unexpected answers:

Does it ever happen to you?

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As my life proceeded, I started experiencing

*fatigue *anxiety *increased sense of loneliness *unexpected mood changes that would affect my daily life *frequent sadness *suicidal thoughts *fear for the future and hidden *hope to die young*



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The Journey Through HIV, background information:

Diagnosed when I was 23

I had just experienced an abusive relationship
I was young, scared and uninformed

Supportive family

Relatively easy access to Healthcare in the country where I was living

Change in my life plans: I was about to move to Brasil and I didn't



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*Re-shaping my identity adding a circle to my intersectionality: Gay and HIV positive

*Irreversible condition: challenges of a life-long condition

*Add a layer of difficulty to many of my interactions

*Concerns about privacy

*Concerns about health in the long



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Uncertainty:

- *What about the future?
- *Will I experience issues at work for being HIV positive?
- *Who are the people I can safely disclose my HIV status to?
- *Will I lose my friends and acquaintances?
- *Will I have good health?
- *Will my HIV status be somewhat visible to others?



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Stigma:

- *Main fear of rejection and loneliness
- *Fear for my reputation, as HIV is associated to people's lifestyle & habits
- *Loss of self esteem? Am I still worthy?
- *Will I still be able to travel?
- *Will I have to disclose my HIV status in non-HIV-related healthcare facilities?
- *Will my status affect my work?



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Resilience:

- *what can I do with my pain?
- *is my responsibility to use my position to make change happen?
- *should I keep being afraid of my HIV status being disclosed?
- *can I accept HIV as a forming part of my present identity?
- *will a public disclosure help me navigate this experience?



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What I decided to do with my pain:



POSITIVE, HEALTHY, FREE.

Lisbon LGBTQ Pride, 2016

Campaign by Plus - LGBT
network of PLWHIV

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How I dealt with my social responsibilities:



Lisbon, 2016

Embracing intersectionality

Acknowledging my privilege

Being committed to make
the change happen

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How I handled the fear of disclosure:



LGBTQ Pride

Bologna, 2015

Team Work,
with love

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incorporating HIV in my present identity:

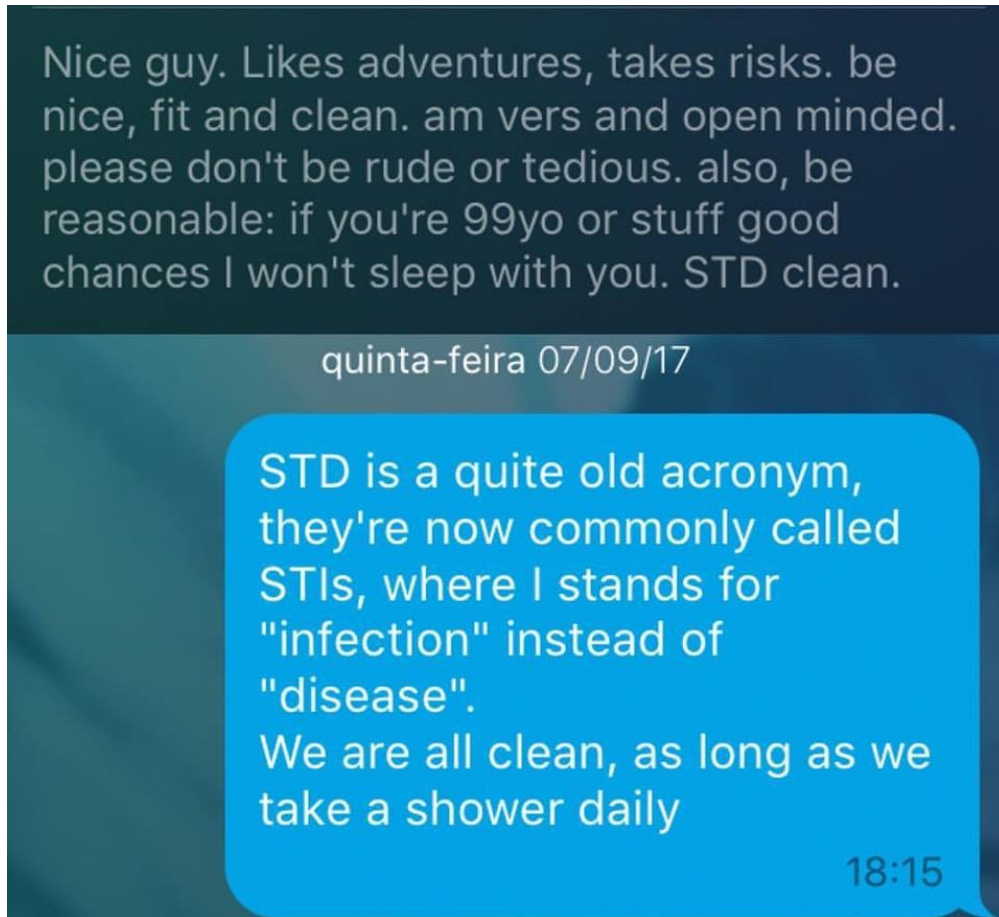


Bringin HIV into
my work as a
performer:

Paula Lovely,
The HIV+
Queen

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How public disclosure made my life easier:



Dating apps and social networks:

No longer afraid to educate other people and confront the stigma openly.

We are HIV positive.
We are all clean.

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Although there has been a big work of empowerment and education, especially through activism, I still struggle with my mental health and access to professional support is not easy.

Through the National Healthcare System I managed to regularly see a psychiatrist and get my therapies prescribed, but no free psychological support was provided.

I managed to see a psychologist who worked with the HIV department, for a few times, but just as an emergency measure.

Mental Health can be expensive and at present I am not receiving support.



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Mental illness.

- I did not choose this.
 - I did not want this.
 - I did not make this happen.
 - I am not faking this.
 - I am not asking for sympathy.
- Please just try and understand that I'm trying the best I can.

*Activism worked as a coping mechanism that strengthened my personality, however

*Public exposure had its good and bad consequences

*Mental Health has its own stigma, regardless if it's related directly or indirectly to another health condition.

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As Mental Health Issues are more common among People Living with HIV



- *Need to eradicate stigma related to Mental Health itself
- *Need to improve access to Mental Health Services with special attention for those who live with HIV
- *Need to be open about mental Health and dispel false myths about it

In my personal experience, **inspiration** has been the main key for surviving and giving sense to my life again.

