

# EQUAL BUT SEPARATE

EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN HIV POSITIVE STUDENTS

# I wish I could be able to disclose, because I know it's going to make me free... but my problem is other people.

## background

The University of Cape Town in South Africa has an estimated 10% HIV infection rate. Despite 14 years of HIV/AIDS education and support initiatives, no University of Cape Town student has yet publicly disclosed her/his HIV-positive status on campus and some students have reported to AIDS support staff that they have not disclosed to any friends or classmates on campus. It is thought that fear of stigmatization is a motivating factor in non-disclosure.

## methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with 7 female HIV-positive students to explore reasons for disclosure or non-disclosure to family, peer group, intimate partners and publicly. The relationship between fear of stigmatization and disclosure was reviewed. (No male HIV-positive students responded to the call for participants). A narrative approach and grounded theory was used in analyzing the data.

## results

All of the 7 students experienced hearing views from fellow students that stigmatize HIV-positive people. They all relate fear of being stigmatized to not publicly disclosing or not disclosing to certain groups. Some students experience the secret of being HIV-positive as a burden. In interviews, individual students transitioned between speaking about a) not minding who knew their HIV status and b) needing to keep their status a secret. This reflected the development of a complex identity in an environment rich in discourses around equality, yet experienced as judgmental.

## conclusion

Fear of stigma is a motivating factor in non disclosure. Effective anti-stigma campaigns need to be employed to assist students in feeling more comfortable to disclose to friends and classmates, or publicly on campus should they wish to do so. Many of these intelligent, articulate women are on ARVs, completing degrees in a range of demanding disciplines. These students also have the potential to shift public perceptions about HIV.

## Quotes from HIV positive students

"People do disclose in public... What I've noticed is how you have the spotlight from that moment on. Every time people look at you, that's all they see. I could tell people, but my problem is that's all they'd see. I know myself and I know I'm much bigger, I've achieved more than I thought I could, and for people to just label myself, HIV, it's just too much for me."

Vika, age 23

"Like, when we were watching TV in the res, there were lots of boys and girl around and an actor had died and it was on the news. One of them said: Hah! He had AIDS and he's going to die because he was sleeping around because he wasn't married. Yhu! That hit me. I was silenced. I couldn't say anything. I wished I could say something, but it affected me. I was so hurt, I was so emotional. "

Lerato, age 25

"You know, I so wish I could be able to do that [disclose]. I so wish I could be able to because I know it's going to make me free. I so wish I could just go there in front of everyone and say people I'm HIV-positive and so what, but the problem is for instance, one time Hermina (nurse at student health) asked me to go to a campaign where I would speak to students and tell them about my status, but my worry at that time was my baby at the crèche. I was worried about him being stigmatized because some people would know that he is HIV-positive, so I was protecting him in a way. But, about me, I so wish I could just go there and tell people that I am HIV-positive, but my problem is other people."

Nandi, age 30



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