

A Positive / Negative Divide?

By Tom Moon, MFT

Is there a divide between HIV positive and HIV-negative gay men? Have we become two separate communities? Some men think so.

Nick, a 30-year-old man who's been positive for four years feels it whenever he cruises online. He says "It hurts to read ads that say 'I'm drug and disease free, you be, too,' or phrases like 'bug free' or 'unclean.' There's such an attitude of contempt. I don't judge negative guys for not wanting to hook up with positive guys, because, truth be told, when I was negative that's how I was. But is it too much to ask that people in our own community be a little nicer and more respectful toward each other when talking about HIV online?"

"I always used to disclose my serostatus before hooking up with anyone, even though I only have safe sex. But so many guys who are fine with playing if they don't know my status won't do it if I tell them I'm positive, so there's an incentive to keep quiet about it. But if I don't mention it upfront, some guys are pissed off when I tell them later, even though they didn't ask or tell me what their status was. It's like, the responsibility is all on the positive guy. It's just starting to seem less complicated to have sex only with other positive men.

"My energy level is so unpredictable that I can't work anymore, and I had to give up my career and go on permanent disability. That was devastating. But people don't want to hear about it; it's too painful. I still look healthy, and I know there are negative guys who think I'm just taking advantage of the government. I'm not living the high life. I'd give anything to trade places with them.

And now I'm on a limited fixed income and don't have the money I used to have and can't afford to do some of the things my negative friends like to do, like go out to expensive restaurants. More and more I'm just hanging with other positive guys who are also on disability, and I feel separate from everybody else. I'm worried that if I start getting symptoms like facial wasting it'll be even worse. It's bad to feel like a leper in my own community."

There are also HIV-negative men who feel a divide. Frank, also thirty and HIV-negative, tells me "I'm totally committed to staying negative, but when you like getting fucked as much as I do it's a never-ending worry. I wish more positive guys understood that and didn't take it as a personal rejection if I'm nervous about having sex with them. I don't want to stigmatize anybody, I just want to stay healthy! None of my positive friends will do anything that might put negative guys at risk, but I've met plenty of strangers who don't care if I get HIV or not. Sometimes, if I tell a positive guy that I want him to put on a condom, he looks annoyed, like I'm inconveniencing him or even insulting him. I feel a distrust that I didn't used to feel, and on top of it I sometimes feel envied and resented by positive guys, so I find I'm sticking more with negative men."

"What sucks is that only positive guys are allowed to talk about this stuff. Negative guys can only talk about their feelings quietly, and only with other negative guys. When positive guys are in the conversation, we have to defer to them. It's like, you're the lucky ones, so stop whining and feeling sorry for yourself. I know that be-

ing positive is much harder than being negative, but I'd like to feel more that the community really cares that I stay negative."

One factor that may be widening this divide is that many perceive the whole subject as too dangerous to discuss, especially in mixed status groups. Last September, however, the San Francisco Gay Men's Community Initiative took the risk of organizing an open community forum on the issue, and I was honored to be asked to co-facilitate it. I personally found the experience very encouraging, and my impression was that all of the 56 participants felt the same. When men were able to air their concerns in an atmosphere of mutual respect, it became obvious to everyone present that there is abundant willingness on both sides of the "divide" to listen without judgment, to examine one's own stereotypes and misperceptions, and to respond to each other with compassion. This kind of frank dialogue doesn't make all the differences between positive and negative men go away, but this forum convinced me these differences only become a rift in the community when we treat discussion of them as taboo. One action community leaders can take to help heal this divide, then, is to create safe venues for both positive and negative gay men to speak and to hear each other's truth.

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