



Talking about HIV with a partner

Key Facts and Discussion

Facilitators' Guide

Thinking about telling your partner about your HIV status? Here are our top tips:

Telling your partner about your HIV status can be daunting and many people fear rejection. Here are a few things to think about so you can feel prepared.

1. Remember that you don't have anything to apologise for, simply because you are living with HIV.
2. Before you talk to your partner it can help to have some information on hand to share with them. They may think that HIV means you don't have long to live, or that you won't be able to have sex safely in future, or have a family. If you can help them to understand the facts about HIV, and reassure them, they are less likely to react negatively. There is lots of information at www.avert.org.
3. Think about the best time to tell them – a time when they won't be rushing somewhere and are less likely to be stressed.
4. Find a place where you are unlikely to be interrupted so you can take your time. Give them time to take in what you're saying. Check they understand and offer to answer any questions they have.
5. Whatever your partner's reaction is at first, be aware that reactions can change over time.
6. If you've had unprotected sex with your partner, it's important for them to get tested. Once they know their status you can decide the best way to practice safer sex together in the future.
7. Fear and stigma can stir up very strong emotions. Be prepared that your status may make some people afraid or judgmental. Remember that you are still you, and your status doesn't define you.

And remember...

1. Talking to a friend or family member you trust about your HIV status can help you process your thoughts and emotions. Keeping it all to yourself can make you feel isolated.
2. You should never feel pressured into disclosing your status to anyone you don't trust. If you have recently found out you are HIV-positive, it may be worth taking some time to take in the news yourself, so you are better prepared to tell others.

Ideas for discussion

1. What do you think are the benefits to YOU and to YOUR PARTNER of disclosing your status? Think of at least 3 benefits for each of you.

FACILITATORS' NOTES

Groups may talk about how disclosing your status helps you have safer sex – you can make better choices about protection when you both have all the facts.

They may also discuss how honesty in a relationship can build trust. Sharing your HIV status demonstrates that you care about the health of your partner and can make you feel closer.

Keeping a secret can be stressful. Often sharing your status comes as a relief. When someone accepts your positive status, it can feel good and might also help you accept being positive yourself.

2. Why do you think it may be particularly difficult and emotional telling someone who is a current or previous sexual partner about your HIV status?

FACILITATORS' NOTES

Because HIV can be transmitted through sex, telling your sexual partners can raise more questions, such as 'does this mean I am at risk too?'

Lots of people worry that their partner will be upset or angry or blame them. Partners might also worry that they are positive too. Other people might be afraid that their sexual partners will leave them if they tell them they have HIV. It's important that people know all the facts about treatment and prevention to address some of the questions and worries that might come up.

3. If you're in a relationship, think about what kind of reaction you think your partner would have if you told them you were living with HIV. What would be your reaction if they told you they were HIV-positive?

FACILITATORS' NOTES

Partners may be grateful to have that information, as it shows care and consideration of their sexual health and that they are trusted with information that is very personal.

However, others might be angry, upset, worried or have reactions that are more stigmatising. If they don't have all the facts about prevention they might either worry about their own health, or be concerned that their partner is very sick.

4. What places (or people), in your community or nearby, do you think could give you support, or help you think through possible reactions?

FACILITATORS' NOTES

Ideas might include: friends, family, healthcare workers, counsellors or teachers, support groups, other people living with HIV, youth groups, religious leaders or communities, anyone else they trust and have a good relationship with – such as a neighbour. They might also think about online support groups as an alternative.

5. How do you think telling your partner might change your relationship and your feelings for each other? Think of both the ways it could damage and improve your relationship.

FACILITATORS' NOTES

Options for improvement: it creates trust, might mean you both feel more comfortable sharing personal information in the future, means you don't have to worry about hiding medication. It could also be a way of getting support with adherence or other health matters.

Damaging possibilities: the risk of rejection – this should be talked about gently, reminding groups that this often does not happen and, if it does, it could be a sign that the other person is not right for them.

6. If you live in a small community or rural area, what do you think are the particular things you might need to think about, and prepare yourself for, when telling a partner?

FACILITATORS' NOTES

If the person lives in a small community they may worry that the information will get out and spread more widely to people they hadn't planned on telling.

7. What do you think might be some of the questions that your partner will have for you?

FACILITATORS' NOTES

They might want to understand the risk of HIV being passed on and the ways that they can protect themselves. They may also ask about your health and how they can support you. In some cases people might ask how you got HIV. It's up to you whether you tell them or feel that they don't need to know that.

8. You have the right to protect your own privacy, and your partner has some right to expect honesty from you. Which is more important, privacy or honesty?

FACILITATORS' NOTES

Answers may vary, both responses should be respected. If groups value privacy, they should also note that it is important that they keep partners safe by using protection. If they value honesty, it should be noted that someone's HIV status is personal information and should only be shared if you have permission.

9. If a partner or friend discloses to you, in what ways can you react or support them?

FACILITATORS' NOTES

As a friend/partner of someone disclosing, you'd probably know more about how they'd want someone to react. Different people may expect/need different responses, however it is important to not be judgmental in any way, and avoid asking intrusive questions. They may want to tell you more, but if not, don't press them. It should always be up to the person disclosing how much they want to tell you, how involved you should be, and who else knows.