



Living a Positive Life

M: You're invited to listen to our stories. Our stories are real but details have been changed to protect our privacy.

F: You will notice that we have all used different ways to overcome our difficulties.

M: Learning to live with HIV/AIDS has been a long journey for each of us and we have taken many small steps to be where we are today.

F: We hope you will see some similarities to your own story.

M: We hope you will feel that you're not alone. That we all have similar needs.

F: For love, for respect, for care... for a healthy life.

M: Welcome to our stories...

<<music>>

(voice): If you need more detailed information about HIV/AIDS, ask your health worker for a copy of the Living a Positive Life booklet.

Script A:

Speaker: Young gay man living in a capital city

I found out that I was HIV positive when my boyfriend suggested that we go for a test at a sexual health clinic. I never thought that I could be positive. I couldn't believe it. I was shocked. I used to ask, 'Why me?' 'What have I done to deserve this?'

I was terribly angry and scared. I thought I was going to die. I found that I couldn't work or relate to other people. And our relationship collapsed. First I started blaming him, then I started blaming others, society, even my family overseas... Then I started blaming myself and

getting really depressed and lonely. I was feeling that if I touched someone, I would kill that person. Feeling dirty, feeling like I was worth nothing.

To make things worse, I didn't know how the health system works in Australia. I was lucky to find a good doctor that told me about treatment and about support groups.

I didn't really want to go. I didn't want to meet other positive people. I didn't want to know about their sad stories.... Maybe it was like seeing myself in a mirror.

What helped me was to accept my condition. Before I used to think that I had this 'enemy' inside me. That I had a war inside my body. That I had to destroy the virus... I was hating the HIV, hating everyone, and in the end, hating myself...

Eventually I stopped seeing the virus as an enemy, and I started to see it as something to live

with, which helped me to find self-love and to live in internal peace. I've changed the images of 'killing the virus' with more peaceful ones, like a vision of the medicine cleaning the virus.

After accepting myself, I was able to accept others. I was able to ask for services that I needed and demand respect. I was able to share my feelings with other positive people and health care workers, I was able to make new friends and surround myself with people who accept me for what I am.

It has been an interesting journey. HIV has taught me a lot. I've learnt with my doctor how to take medication, I've learnt how to eat well and cook my own food. I've learnt how to take care of myself. I've learnt how to negotiate and have a safe sex life. I'm happy that I was strong enough to survive, not only with HIV, but to have survived all the discrimination and fear surrounding it.

HIV is not my enemy. The enemies are ignorance, fear, and discrimination. With HIV I found a new passion – passion to decrease discrimination by sharing my story. I decided to do a training course to give talks about my story in schools, workplaces and community groups. I feel I am giving something back to the community by increasing the understanding of HIV/AIDS and different sexualities.

I'm loving again. I'm still not sure if he will be my future partner, but it is a start. I now measure my life by its depth, not its length (giggle)...

Script B:

Speaker: Straight man living in a small city married with one kid

I couldn't believe I had HIV. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't do anything for a long time. I was very depressed. I was worried that my wife and little son would have to survive without me. My health became a full time job. I went through some bad side effects, but the treatment was successful at the end. I'm much healthier now.

While I was in hospital, people were asking my wife about me. People knew that something was wrong. They could see that I was very thin. I was ashamed and sad for putting my wife in this situation. I thought about killing myself to stop our shame.

Waiting for my wife's and son's test results was terrible. I would never wish this moment on anyone. Unfortunately, my wife was also found HIV positive, but thankfully our son was negative – without HIV. We went to pray for his health. My wife was always healthier than me. She has the virus but she has still not started treatment.

I think I made a mistake by telling some people about our situation. Even after telling them that our son did not have HIV, I noticed that some of his friends stopped coming to our place. In a small city, before you know it, it's common knowledge.

Once he asked me why some children were avoiding him. I started crying and went to another room. I couldn't face him. He's too young to understand.

Eventually I found support outside our city. I was listening to our community radio when I heard about a service provided in my language. I called this service. They put me in touch with the AIDS Council. I was able to find out about my rights and learn more about HIV. They were able to send me some information in my language in a very discreet package.

I have not told my parents about our situation. They live back home and I went there two years ago on a holiday. I did tell one of my sisters. She was so upset. But she understands. Now we send emails to each other to keep in contact.

I've learnt to be more careful about telling people about our situation. I've learnt to 'test' people first by listening to their opinions about the HIV problem in our country.

I blame only myself for my wife's fate. I'm eternally grateful that she stood by me and forgave me. What keeps both of us going is our love for each other and our love for our son.

We've learnt to take life as it comes – day-by- day – without worrying too much about the future. Nobody knows about the future. We are all in the same boat. We only wish the best for our son.

Script C:

Speaker: Young straight woman living in a small town without children

My family arranged my marriage. I had no choice. Marrying was an opportunity to help my family by sending money home. To apply for my residency I had to do a medical check. It was when I got the result. I was really sad. HIV means death in my country. I was really scared that I was going to be sent back, because I didn't have permanent residency.

I want to believe that my husband didn't know about HIV. That he was not aware that he was HIV positive when we got married. We don't touch this subject. I'm scared in case this is not the truth.

I accepted HIV because I believed it was a punishment for sins from a previous life. I had a few good men wanting to marry me in my country, but it was a bad fate that my family chose my current husband. I did not want to tell my mother. They did it because they believed it was the right thing to do.

At first I didn't want to think about HIV and my situation. I kept myself busy working hard to send money to my mother. I used to write to her telling her how I was happy here and how the town was beautiful, but I always had to rewrite it, because I did not want her to see the marks of my tears on the paper.

No one knows about our situation in our town. I worry that they will think we're 'bad' people.

What helped me was to realise that to have HIV is not something to be ashamed of, but something to learn from. Looking at my story through a different angle, it was a good fate to have moved to Australia, because here, I'm able to have treatment that is not available in my country.

It was also a good fate, to have contact with a good doctor that told me about a service in the city where there was a health worker able to understand my needs. Since then my life has changed for the better. I had someone to trust to tell my secret and someone who understood my culture. It was a relief to have so much heavy weight out of my heart.

Only a few people know that I'm HIV positive. Living in a small town can be hard. I protect my privacy and I know the people who work in the clinic do not tell others unless I give permission.

I'm learning to live with HIV. I've learnt how good it is to share my feelings with my support worker. I know now that HIV is not a death sentence, and I read about people living with HIV for more than 20 years. I love living, so I want to live longer to be able to see my family again. I'm learning hairdressing and learning about Australian culture. People in Australia are friendly and try to help me.

Script D:

Speaker: Straight woman living in a capital city with children

I was scared when I found I was HIV positive. I didn't understand much about HIV and AIDS. Who would take care of my daughter? I hid myself and avoided calls and visitors. I blamed myself for everything.

I went back to work, but it was very hard. I was very emotional and unable to do simple things, so I had to stop. I didn't tell anyone at work about my situation. I told my manager: "I need

holidays, as soon as possible". Because I was going through a divorce case, they didn't ask much.

I had a few good friends, but now I was wondering who would help me. Who would understand what I was going through? Was I the only one?

Eventually I forced myself to contact my doctor. I had to ... I was pregnant. I had to know whether I was going to live, if my baby would live. I asked if I could meet other women living with HIV. I wanted to see other positive women with children. I wanted to find out if we would have a future. If it was possible to have a normal life with children.

I can still remember my first meeting. I started crying when people started sharing their stories. I could see part of myself in each story. I didn't know these women, but we were connected in some way. It was like we were all 'sisters'. Sisters of fate. Sisters with similar fears. Sisters with similar wishes.

At one of our meetings, I asked the other women about their experience of telling their children about HIV. Some of them said they waited until they were around eight or ten years old.

Now I'm coping extremely well.

No one can say that I'm a positive person just by looking at me. I'm confident that I will have my second child and that the child will be as healthy as my first one. I've learnt that we can help others by sharing our stories and experiences. I've learnt that dreams are essential, because dreams can make us discover new parts of ourselves. I have also learnt that without faith in myself, the lessons of HIV can be lost.