

Ever thought about living with AIDS?

by Amber Dean, Peer Health Educator

We've all heard a lot about HIV and AIDS the past few years. In fact, I'd be surprised if most of us couldn't talk a bit about what the virus is, how it gets transmitted, and what we can do to protect ourselves from it. But there's a side to the story we're not hearing about every day. Ever wonder what happens to people after they're diagnosed HIV positive? We have a tendency to stop thinking about them after they become part of the statistics. Most of us tend to forget that there are real people, flesh and blood, behind those numbers.

Meet Maggie, an Edmonton woman who is HIV positive. When Maggie found out she had contracted the virus, one of the first things she wanted to do was meet another HIV-positive person. "I'd never met a person in my life who was positive," she recalls. "I'd just heard the old fallacy about gay men, so I just thought I probably wouldn't find anybody else around".

Since then, Maggie has met about sixteen Edmonton women who are positive. "I know there's more out there, but those are the ones I know," she says. Most of the HIV positive women Maggie knows were married, have kids, and were monogamous within their relationships when they contracted the virus.

A year after Maggie found out she was HIV positive she discovered that her ex-husband had died in 1990 from AIDS. "I had no sign or knowledge of him being positive," she remembers, "and as I look back I'm sure he wasn't aware either".

Maggie thinks she probably contracted the virus from her ex-husband around 1985, while they

were still married. She currently has no signs of HIV infection. She finds that most people still think they can tell by looking at someone whether or not they have HIV, but Maggie herself is living proof of the falseness of that belief.

One of the hardest things to come to terms with is having to explain to your kids about HIV. Maggie finds she is often disturbed by the fact that "unfortunately, they still have to keep it a secret. You know," she continues, "if I walked into my kids' school and told the teachers I had breast cancer, I can't see any kids running around the yard teasing my kids but already my youngest one's come home and talked about how the kids on the school ground call to each other 'Stupid - you have AIDS'".

It's really hard for Maggie to deal with the fact that her kids have to live with their mommy dying, and that people will still be scared, afraid to touch them, and whispering behind their back that they had a "bad mommy" because she had HIV. Maggie really believes that "it's all connected to the fact that this disease is spread sexually, and nobody wants to talk about sex".



Whenever she does a presentation, Maggie finds that “right away women want to jump up and say ‘you know, women are the fastest growing group of people infected in this country so, like, what’s being done for women and babies’--it’s never just you--you as a woman”. She feels that lots of women immediately want to assume the role of caretakers, and for her there’s a big difference between caretaking and caregiving. “Caretaking is taking away control of my life; caregiving is giving me control of my life,” she wants to clarify, “and there’s too many caretakers out there for my pleasure, thank you very much”.

Maggie has been forced to become well acquainted with the stereotypes that seem to follow condoms and protecting yourself. “Was I ever strong enough,” she wonders, “to actually ask him before I had that relationship--‘would you go get tested’? I think it’s a pretty difficult thing for people to do. Somehow, society says your reputation is more important than your life, and we continue to give that message by talking about HIV in terms of certain people who get it and certain people who deserve it. There’s two types of people who get this disease,” she stresses. “Men... and women.”

So next time you hear a message about HIV transmission or protecting yourself, take a second to think about Maggie and about what it would be like to be living with HIV. It seems to be something that nobody’s thinking much about yet... but maybe we should be.

Maggie is currently working on a national women and HIV project and is becoming a powerful voice in the struggle to get women involved in the decision making process surrounding allocation of funds for supporting individuals living with HIV. We’d like to thank her for having the courage to share her personal experiences so openly.

For more information on avoiding unplanned pregnancy, managing stress, and generally staying healthy and productive as a student, visit the Student Health Resource Centre, 2-300 SUB, or surf over to www.ualberta.ca/HealthInfo