

LIVING POSITIVELY

Why there should be no shame in testing HIV-positive

More often than not, the loss of dignity comes from our own reactions to the way other people treat us

After I tested HIV-positive, it took me a long while to get over the embarrassment and feeling of unworthiness. I felt dirty, largely because back then, anybody who had Aids (nobody talked of HIV then) was labelled a 'loose' woman. I had disgraced my family and in my mind, I wasn't even worthy of being called their daughter, sister or friend.

Shame and self-stigma can make us lose sight of the big picture. When people treat us like pariahs, we could easily believe that life is not worth living. Over the years, this veil has been lifted, but we still need to do more.

My feelings of shame – brought about largely by the sticks and stones society was throwing at me – caused me to reach the point of entertaining suicidal thoughts. I was a young girl then, and I didn't know of any strong HIV-positive woman whom I could look up to. I just couldn't take it anymore.

My earthly hell

"I'm waiting for you to take me wherever you want," I told God, adding that I knew I wouldn't go to heaven, but I preferred the real Hades to my earthly hell.

"Please, just to remove this shame, Lord, take me anywhere as long as it will be out of sight of these people. I can handle anything else you throw at me, Lord, but not this."

Let me tell you what shame does to you. It strips you of your dignity and makes you feel like a third-class citizen. It makes you lock yourself indoors for days on end because you are afraid people will 'see' you (as if that's a crime). And left unchecked, it can lead you to tie a noose around your neck.

Shame did all these things, and more, to me. After a while, I thought I'd never be a constructive citizen again; that I would forever live on the periphery of society.

"What do I have to show for myself?" I asked myself when I looked around at all my friends who had careers and were starting families. That was one of the mistakes I made and I quickly realised that if you start competing against people, you will end up frustrated. This is especially so when you have a condition like HIV and you're preoccupied with the progress other people have made; chances are high that you will become bitter. Then the blame game will start and, if you're unfortunate, drag on for the rest of your life.

To numb the feelings of shame, I would press the

'rewind' button and go back to the good old days when I was HIV-negative. But this only dragged me further into the pit of regret and even more shame.

A new course

Returning to the basics, and in particular the Bible, helped me chart a new course. Why, the road and the rod had been right in front of me all this time! The experience of Moses helped me get out of my shame and use the rod God had placed in my hand: HIV.

When I left my pity party and started giving back to society, using no less than my HIV status as a springboard, I was able to finally get rid of my shame. And society gave back to me in response. Sure, some people continued to malign me, but I was quick to realise that henceforth, that was their problem. I had stumbled on to a good thing and I wasn't going to let it go without a fight.

We all have hopes and dreams for the future and I did too, until HIV reared its ugly head and forced me to change course midstream. Some things, like testing HIV-positive and the shame that comes with it, are too sad for one to imagine that God has a hand in them. Two decades later, I realise

that shame is not from God. It was simply my own reaction to the actions of the people around me that caused me to recoil shamefully into a foetal position.

"Women are the cause of all this," I once overheard a man say in response to a statement about the spread of HIV.

He was a stranger and we were in a public place, otherwise I would have given him a piece of my mind. You see, it is mindsets like these that cause some of our sisters – particularly those who have just tested positive – to walk in shame. It is because they are being blamed for one of the biggest medical migraines in recent times.

And I do know that it cuts both ways. There are men who are living with HIV and weighed down by shame and guilt, and don't know where to turn. Folks, let's open up our hearts and hearths and assure our loved ones that there is no shame in being HIV-positive.

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