

LIVING POSITIVELY

Cutting your losses
and moving along

A positive result for HIV literally knocks the wind out of you; healing depends on what happens next

Loss is the best word to describe what happens after an HIV test comes back positive. Not only does one feel like one has lost tangible possessions, one also feels completely at a loss. Sometimes a person does not know what has hit him. It's like the gods of misfortune have conspired to rob him of the things he treasures most, like peace, joy and love.

Look at me. When I was told I was HIV-positive, I didn't see it coming. Well, nobody I've met has ever told me they 'saw it coming'. I had just met this dashing man and fallen madly in love with him. If anyone, especially a girl, had told me he was HIV-positive, I would have said she was just jealous. I never saw him sick - he looked fine to me. Surely, they had made a big mistake. It took me a long while to get over my denial and come to terms with the fact that this man was HIV-positive.

Baby wouldn't live

Not long after, I was told I was pregnant, which lifted my spirits a little bit, until I was rudely informed that my baby wouldn't live. As far as I was concerned at that point, I had lost everything that was important to me as a woman.

I could barely keep count of the losses: one, loss of my sex life. Two: loss of any hope of marriage. Three: loss of a very cherished thing - conception. Four: loss of dignity. Five: loss of future hopes and dreams. Six: loss of family and friends. Seven: loss of, well, everything.

I later realised that the list wasn't really that long, but at the time it looked like I had received a thorough drubbing from a foe I couldn't even begin to confront.

When things like this happen - one tragic bolt out of the blue after another - it's hard to open up to people, even those who are closest to us. To some people who don't understand what HIV does to one's mind, it seemed like I was taking things a little too hard. After all, there was nothing I could do to change the situation, so why was I spending all my waking hours moping?

I moped because this thing was alien to me and I didn't know a better way to approach it. I knew all the tears in the world couldn't change a thing, except, perhaps the colour of my eyes. But there was no other way my system could externalise the anguish and pain locked deep within my heart. It was only later that a counsellor told me crying is actually therapeutic.

I built an emotional barrier around me, but deep inside I really wanted people to tear it down and rescue me. However, I didn't know how to tell them what I felt. I needed empathy, not pity. I needed a leg up, not a hand-out. I wanted folks to consult me when they were making future decisions about me and my unborn child, not just to come to conclusions based on what they thought was right for me.

Start walking

HIV losses are labyrinthine in nature, and the only way to find healing is to start walking even if one doesn't know where the next turn will lead. Because if you refuse to put one foot in front of the other, and instead allow thoughts of loss to stagnate you, next thing you know you will be blocking your own healing.

Concerned people helped to prod me along, but I had to reciprocate by pulling my own weight. I have seen even the most resilient support staff call it a day the minute they realise one of our clients isn't making any meaningful progress. I had to give the people around me something to work with; a sign that they weren't wasting their efforts on someone who had no will to live. Two decades later, I'm eternally grateful to those who pushed me down the path towards healing. Without them, I would be past tense.

It is the bitterest pill so far, but there is one truth I have been forced to swallow: unless a miracle happens, I can't get this virus out of my system. Moping still has its place in my life, and so does erecting walls, but I realise I must have 'start' and 'stop' buttons because that's the only way I can still go in search of healing.

Manoeuvre my way

It's not a one-day affair. The labyrinth is still there, and I still have to manoeuvre my way through the myriad passages, tunnels and paths. I still need shoulders and reassurances from others who are searching for healing, because I can't do this alone. But the best part is that God has recompensed me more than I ever imagined possible. Now that I'm older and HIV-wiser, I have determined to endeavour to turn my losses into lessons, even though it could take forever.

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