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**HIV is the best thing that happened to our marriage**

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The news could not have come at a worse time. She was just about to give birth to her third child when she learnt that she was HIV-positive.

To make matters worse, she was in an unhappy marriage, a marriage that was headed for the rocks.

“It was just too much for me to process. I was so stunned, I could not even cry,” says 32-year-old Halima Maina.

That was four years ago. Today, Halima and her 36-year-old husband Maina Muriuki say that being diagnosed with HIV turned out to be the saving grace of their once shaky marriage.

“Our marriage is happier and more fulfilling than it was before we found out that we were HIV-positive. We’re better people,” Halima says.

As Maina revisits his former life, one begins to understand Halima’s strange declaration about their marriage being transformed into a happier union by the HIV virus.

“I do not think I would be alive today, if I was HIV-negative,” Maina begins.

He confesses that before knowing his HIV status, alcohol and friends took priority over everything in his life, including his family.

His relationship with his wife was in such tatters that she had contemplated walking out on their 11-year marriage several times.

“He was my husband but I really did not know him because he was rarely home. When he was there, he was too drunk to make sense,” recalls Halima.

Their two sons knew even less of the perpetual drunkard they called daddy.

Maina concedes that the bond between him and his children was even weaker than that with his wife.

To begin with, his job then — a salesman with a local pharmacist — entailed a lot of travelling. He would come back in the wee hours, more often than not drunk.

The boys counted themselves lucky if they saw their father at least once a week, least of all while sober.

“I would leave the house at five in the morning and return late at night, drunk,” he confesses.

Then in the middle of all this gloom, HIV came knocking.

First, Muriuki fell ill and was admitted to Tumutumu Mission Hospital for eight days. His wife was pregnant then, and set to give birth any time. As he lay in his hospital bed, weak and helpless, she delivered their last child, a boy they named Douglas.

It was just before this delivery that the couple learnt about their HIV status. The news was devastating for both of them, so devastating that after being discharged from hospital, Maina fell ill again and was bedridden for five months.

That left his wife to cope alone, not just to nurse their youngest child, but to face the reality of their HIV status alone. Maina was in denial.

Halima says that she was the first to recover. By the time her husband came round to accepting his status, she had nursed their baby for almost six months and was ready to face life and this potent virus called HIV, to which she had never given a thought before.

And suddenly, their roles changed. The strong-willed husband who rarely spent time with his family unexpectedly found himself seeking the comfort of his soft-spoken wife who had quietly borne his truancy for eight years.

Like many men who are confronted with such unexpected news about their HIV status, Maina feared that his wife would leave him. After all, there was no doubt that he was the one who had infected her.

“I took full responsibility. I knew I was the one who infected her because a woman I had been intimate with had died a couple of years back from what I am now convinced was Aids,” says Maina.

Halima did the unexpected. She stayed and chose to confront the virus — and fight for her marriage. It wasn’t easy, though.

“I cried a lot. I asked where I was headed. Did I want my children to live without a father? Eventually, I decided to stay. I chose to live,” says Halima.

She does not regret her decision. Their marriage, she says, has moved to a higher level, one of love, respect, and friendship. Maina is a changed man. He has kicked a habit he had been struggling with for years: alcoholism. He says he now finds the smell of alcohol revolting.

“My drinking friends saw more of me than my wife. But after I was diagnosed HIV-positive, I began a new life,” he says.

His three sons, now aged 11, eight, and four, see more of their father and enjoy a healthy, and easy-going father-son relationship.

“He spends a lot with them,” says Halima.

For this mother of three, HIV has given her what she had quietly longed for during the many dark nights she spent alone with the children — a husband.

“I spent many lonely nights alone, agonising over what he was up to,” she recalls. “In so many ways, this virus that is so feared has given me back my husband. If he did not know his status, I doubt I would have a husband today.”

Halima has changed, too. According to her husband, she was a rather submissive housewife who quietly slipped behind the shadows of married life, as if she was trying to be invisible.

Well, not anymore.

Today, this mother-of-three plays a bigger role in all the major decisions that the family makes than she did before.

Often, she strictly enforces all the decisions made in their home, like those regarding the family diet.

She ensures that everyone, especially her husband, eats a balanced meal with the little resources available.

She is also a stronger character.

“Before, I was a quiet housewife waiting for my husband to come home. I rarely questioned his behaviour. Not anymore. I have a voice now, and I know that I am entitled to respect and appreciation from my husband, which I am getting.”

And although her husband is currently jobless and relies on odd jobs to provide for them, Halima says that they are happier.

“The bond between us has strengthened. We spend more time together, we share our thoughts more freely. I can now confidently say that we’re a happily married couple,” agrees Maina.

Initially, they feared that those who knew them would shun them because of their status and kept this information to themselves.

But they decided to shake off this fear and begun telling people about their status.

“If sharing our story could help other couples make decisions that would safeguard their health and marriage, we would share it,” says Maina.

They occasionally volunteer as peer counsellors for local support groups of people living with HIV and Aids, in Karatina, Central Kenya, where they come from.

They also talk to married couples about the importance of HIV testing, and over time, the community around them has embraced them.

In a society where an HIV diagnosis begins a despairing mental journey dogged by stigma for many, Maina and his wife have become an inspiration.

They are a poster couple for HIV/Aids anti-stigma campaigns, whose message is perhaps more powerful than any HIV testing and counselling billboard on the streets.

According to the coordinator of the Karatina Home Based Care and Counselling Centre, Samuel Kimiru, the Mainas form the backbone of a team that is encouraging married couples to know their HIV status.

“Many couples are now attending counselling sessions and those who are not married are now able to bargain for safe sex,” says Kimiru.

The result is yet another victory against the spread of HIV and Aids in marriage.

And thanks partly to a positive attitude, the Mainas are healthy and strong enough to lead a normal life.

Their campaign has borne fruit. So far, 20 HIV-free babies have been born to HIV-positive couples within the various support groups they have inspired, a factor that the local coordinator of Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTC), Jennifer Wothaya, describes as “the most impressive record in central Kenya.”

Available statistics indicate that married, untested couples present the biggest challenge in the war against HIV and Aids. Experts say that if more married couples would realise that being HIV positive does not necessarily mean an end to their marriages and lives, a big part of the battle would be won.

Halima and Maina want to encourage testing, saying this would go a long way to wiping out the HIV virus.

“I know there are many people who think that they are better of not knowing their HIV status. I want to tell them that they have a better chance of living a longer and more meaningful life if they knew their status,” says Maina.