GET TESTED BEFORE MARRIAGE

Could you be in a

discordant relationship?

**BY FRIDA NJOGU NDONGWE**

Often, in the region where

I work; men are unwilling to get tested for HIV. They ask their wives to get the test done, and then they assume that their wife’s status is theirs as well. They could not be farther from the truth.

You could be living in a stable sexual union with your spouse or partner, yet that union might be discordant. As far as HIV is concerned, this refers to a situation where one partner is HIV-positive while the other is HIV-negative. In fact, this situation is quite common.

Among HIV-infected people in Kenya, almost half are in a discordant relationship, meaning that their partners are HIV-negative. Unfortunately, many are unaware of this, and continue to place themselves or their partners at risk of HIV infection. This situation is largely to blame for many new infections:

About half of all new infections in Kenya each year occur within marriage or stable cohabiting relationships and this is largely due to unknown discordant states.

**Here is why you should take an**

**HIV test with your partner:**

Either you or your partner might be HIV-infected, yet unaware, or one of you might be infected but afraid to disclose their status for fear of being abandoned or blamed.

This is especially common in cases where the woman finds out her status first. It is beneficial to take a test together since you will both find out your own and each other’s status. If you both test negative, you will be advised on how to remain that way. If infected, you are advised on how to live positively and how and where to receive care, including life-prolonging anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs. If one partner is negative, you receive counselling on how to live together and minimise the risk

of transmitting the infection to the uninfected partner.

It is important to note that just because one of you tests positive,

it does not necessarily mean that you have been unfaithful. It is quite likely that they were infected before you got into the union. This is the reason many churches encourage that you both get tested before marriage so you get into the relationship knowing each other’s status.

You could also have been infected from blood transfusion, injuries, rape/sodomy, or through unsterile medical instruments.

**What should you do if you are discordant?**

One, accept the discordance without blaming each other. HIV has become a chronic condition like many others, hence many are living with it for decades. With proper care and use of ARVs, many do not develop Aids, which is advanced HIV infection. Also, the availability of ARVs has reduced the risk of spread to sexual partners and to unborn babies.

Two, get counselling on how to live and minimise the risk of spread to the uninfected partner. This will entail correct and consistent use of condoms and proper use of ARVs by the infected partner. The WHO recently advocated for the use of

ARVs for all HIV-infected members of a discordant couple and it is hoped that Kenya will adopt these guidelines, which are expected to go a long way in reducing spread to sexual partners.

The HIV-uninfected partner should give psychosocial support to their spouse/partner to adhere to ARVs, as advised by the doctor.

Additionally, it is important that you both get regular screening for, and prompt treatment of any sexually transmitted infections (STIs). If one of you has an STI, both should get treated. STIs increase the risk of transmission and acquisition of HIV. Many couples have lived together in discordant relationships and remained so for decades. It does not have to be the end of your relationship. If you support each other, there is little that cannot be achieved.

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health

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**Do not get**

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**Send your questions to**

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