

Partners

Missing person

As a negative partner of someone with HIV, you'll be sharing the burden of living with the virus. Your HIV positive partner has the immediate health problem, but you are most at risk of stress, being stigmatised and loneliness. You may also be worried about becoming infected. Often you will feel invisible both within and outside your relationship.

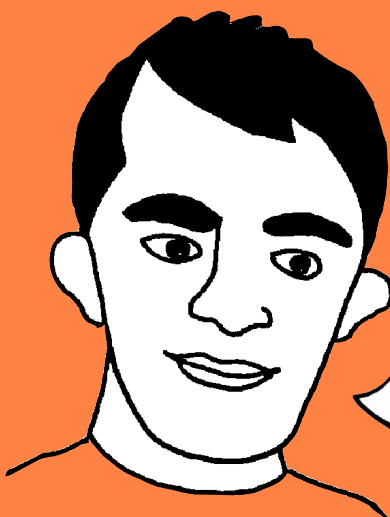
Finding out your partner is positive may open up a whole range of confused feelings in you including shock and anger. Some partners say that coping with HIV on a daily basis is like being in a strange landscape with no signposts, full of suppressed sorrow and ongoing loss.

I'm angry with my positive partner for being so reckless with his life, and how that affects me and the kids. Jennifer

As a partner you are likely to have very few, if any, people like yourself to relate to, and you may feel under pressure not to tell. To the outside world, it can look like everything is normal, but you may feel emotionally isolated. Sometimes people who know your partner is positive may think you are positive as well. Your relationship with your immediate family can also change and it could take you some time to work out how you feel and come to terms with your own fears and concerns about having HIV in your life.

There are a wide range of HIV/AIDS services available to you as a negative partner. It's important that you contact these services and let them know if you need help. They will go out of their way to make you feel welcome and give you the support and advice you need. Your needs as a negative person are as important as those of your positive partner.

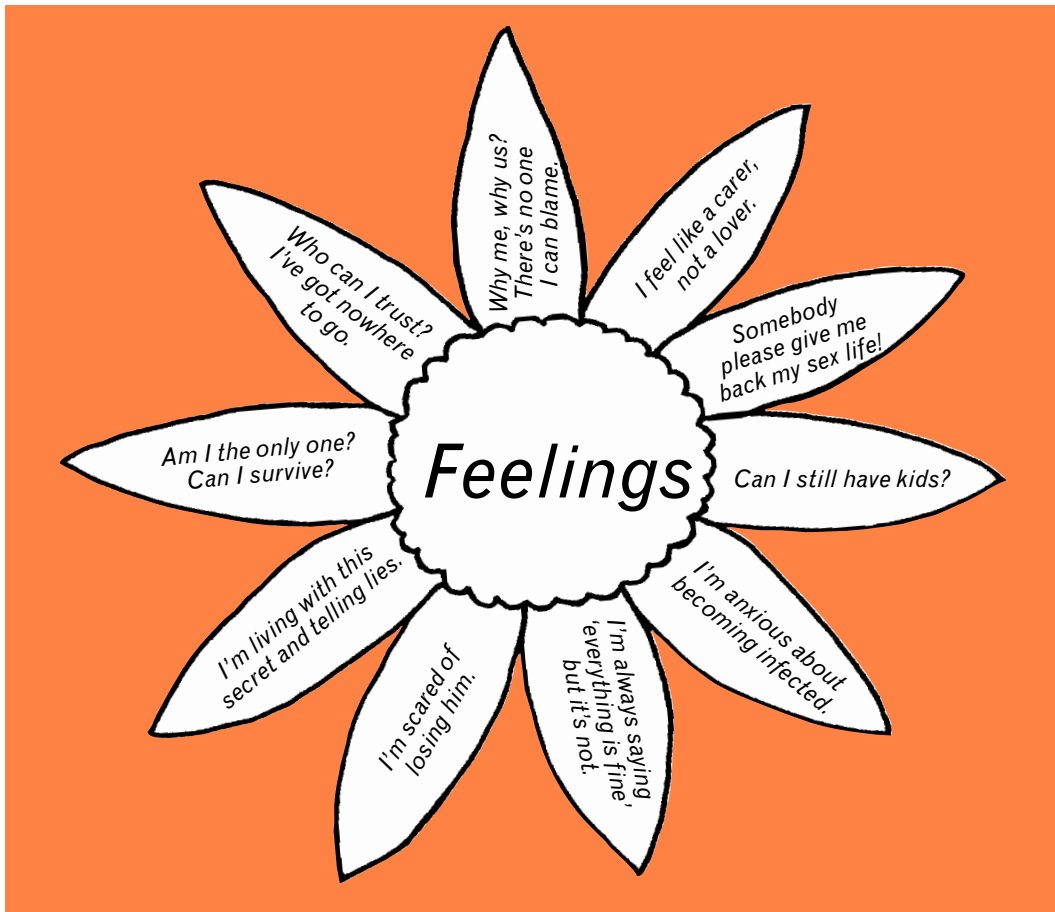
So what's the good news? It is important to know that there are many negative partners who have worked through these things and have found happiness. They are still sharing their lives and futures with a positive person after many years.



*The partner who's not positive is probably the most isolated.
David*

*Sometimes the whole HIV thing drains me. I hate living with this cloud over our heads.
Theresa*





It's understandable if you feel angry about your positive partner's status. Sometimes unrecognised anger and the stress of coping with the virus may press a button inside you when you least expect it. Some negative partners say that they've had to come to terms with whatever caused their partner to get infected in the first place.

Telling others

I tell all these brightly coloured lies all the time. Rebecca

My friends are divided into two camps. Those who know I live with HIV and make me feel less isolated, and those who are told 'everything's fine!' Jennifer

There are tourists who are simply curious, those who truly care, and others who don't want to know. I've made mistakes and told people I shouldn't have. Maria

Talking about HIV with others can be difficult. There aren't many people outside your relationship as a couple you'll be sharing this with. Even at work your friends are unlikely to sit down together and chat about HIV over a cup of coffee. Some people say that living with HIV is very silencing. They describe themselves as not feeling 'real' when relating to other people. One of the biggest things they are dealing with in their lives is rarely discussed or remains a well-kept secret. So it's important that you are able to talk about HIV with your partner and share the many things you are dealing with.

Many couples make rules to protect themselves from gossip and prying when they talk to other people outside the family. One rule might be that you both don't tell anyone before discussing this together. It's a good idea to work with your partner and decide who can be told and what is said. Some partners may even choose to have friends who will never know about their HIV because they'd rather keep that part of their lives private.

If you tell your family about HIV they may not know at first how to deal with it or how to treat your partner. They may wish you were with someone else who was not HIV positive and can show this in subtle ways. They may also worry about your health, your finances (if your partner gets sick) and your future. It may be difficult for them to discuss all this with you. They may even feel cut off and burdened by their anxieties. Your family can get help from HIV/AIDS counsellors to discuss their concerns.

Enjoying your 'negativity'

I feel like I'm living in a tent and nobody sees me. Jennifer

What's important is remaining negative while having a sex life, helping my husband stay healthy, having a good sense of the absurd and keeping our 'secret'. Jacqui

As a negative partner you may forget your own physical, sexual and emotional needs. You may find yourself concentrating on your positive partner's health and their needs, at the expense of your own. Some partners say that they feel like they have 'disappeared' inside the relationship because of this.

Take time out and do things that are just for you. Celebrate your negativity and recognise that it is an important part of your life and your relationship. Talk over your experiences as a negative partner with others in the same situation. Contact an HIV/AIDS counsellor for help on ways to take care of your negative status.

Testing

A doctor said to me 'your negativity is a very important thing, you must protect it!' We have safe sex; I get tested once a year. Maria

The protection comes from keeping safe. David

How can I ever relax when we're having sex? How will everyone cope if I do get infected? Should I think about not having sex? Should I get tested more often? Theresa

How do I cope with the pressure from my partner to have unsafe sex? I might want it too, but I'm scared of getting infected. Rebecca

It's stressful to get a test. I do it when I want to know! Jennifer

As a negative partner, you'll need to find a clinic or a doctor you feel comfortable with if you choose to have regular HIV tests. To feel OK about testing it's also useful to understand how HIV is transmitted. Having a confidential chat with an HIV/AIDS counsellor can be a good way to get the information you need.

It's also important that you decide what kind of support you need before and after getting HIV tests and arrange this each time you go for a test. You will also need to work out with your partner what role they will play and how you can share this together.

Testing can cause anxiety, for both you and your partner, and is a reminder that you are living with HIV/AIDS. Make sure that you have the right support and advice to help you deal with this.

What about me?

*Being a negative partner takes up so much time there's no time for me.
If there is, then I feel guilty and I don't do anything anyway. Maria*

It's normal to get stressed if you are living with someone who is sick or who may get sick in the future. At times it may be hard to find words that express your feelings. You may ask yourself 'who is looking after me?'

If you are feeling stressed, here are some tips that may help.

- Take 30 minutes out each day to do something that is totally about you and nobody else, eg take a bubble bath, listen to your favourite music, read a magazine.
- Go out with a friend
- Join an HIV/AIDS support group and talk to others - it's likely that they feel the same way that you do and may offer some practical ideas.
- Get outdoors and go for a walk. Fresh air and exercise are great for clearing your mind and relieving stress.
- Talk about your HIV experience as a negative partner with an HIV/AIDS counsellor.

Ask yourself what kind of help you can give your positive partner that doesn't add to your stress. You don't have to take care of everything to do with HIV yourself. Remember, there is a wide range of services to help both you and your partner. They include home help, financial assistance, counsellors, social workers and support groups where you can meet other people in a similar situation. So reach out for help... it's out there!

Getting support

I'm hoping to make friends with other negative partners. It would be nice to talk to someone who understands. Jennifer

You don't spend your whole time keeping up your double life. Rebecca

Other negative partners living with HIV can be a great source of help, comfort and inspiration. It can be good to hear how other partners live with this virus. Joining a support group with other men and women partners helps you learn useful things, make friends and relax with others who respect your need for confidentiality. An HIV support group is private and safe. Give it a try!

Call Pozhet on 1800 812 404 for free, friendly, confidential support and a calendar of events that includes information sessions, country visits, social evenings and seaside retreats.