

# *HIV Risk Reduction*

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## **Empowering HIV-Positive Women** *Facing Unique Challenges to Live with HIV*

**W**e've all heard the expression, "Life can turn on a dime," and no one knows this better than Stephanie Laster.

Almost two decades ago, she was diagnosed with HIV, and in that moment, her life's path began to take her in new and unexpected directions. Today, she serves as the HIV Prevention Specialist/Bridge Leadership Program Associate for SisterLove, an Atlanta-based non-profit dedicated to eradicating the adverse impact of HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health challenges on women and their families through education, prevention, support and human rights advocacy. Laster is a powerful advocate for the elimination of the stigma of HIV, and is a motivational speaker on the topics of self-worth, adherence and disclosure, as well as the coordinator of SisterLove's Positive Women's Leadership Program.

"My passion is to empower HIV positive women and help them with their disclosure issues, so we can dispel the stigma that comes along with an HIV positive diagnosis," said Laster. "So many times women stay in the closet and continue to focus on everyone else except themselves because they don't want to deal with or be associated with being HIV positive. My mission is to reach out to these women and help them realize that it's OK. You can move forward and you are capable of doing whatever it takes to move forward."



### **Client Perspective on How to Give an HIV+ Diagnosis**

1. Be compassionate; what you are saying will change someone's life forever. Let her know that you will walk her through the next steps.
2. Make the first referral appointment while the client is still with you. She needs to know what her next step will be.
3. Offer to link your client with a counselor and/or a support group. As I tried to figure out how to live with HIV, it was so important to me to realize that I was not alone. When I went through my grief process, having a therapist and a support group was invaluable.

## HIV Stigma is Personal

“We live in a world where HIV in general is still a stigmatizing topic, and it impacts just about every level of HIV response,” said Dazon Dixon Diallo, Founder and President of SisterLove. “Since the mid-80s, HIV and AIDS have stratified American society. We all remember that AIDS was first labeled the ‘gay disease’ and is now thought of by many as a ‘minority health crisis’. On an individual level, the stigma can be a barrier for intimate partners to talk about using condoms, negotiating safer sex, and disclosing sexual behaviors or other risky behaviors like substance abuse. And, on a social level, there are still people who are discriminated against on the job or ostracized by their families and friends because of their diagnosis.”

Many women fear relinquishing their roles as nurturer upon receiving a positive diagnosis. How will this change their relationship with their intimate partner? How will it affect their dating life? Will they be able to have children? How will their existing children react to the news? Laster addresses these and many other questions in her daily work and through her inspirational talks.

“As women, we sometimes think that if we’re not already in a committed relationship, then the HIV di-



*Many women fear that a positive diagnosis means losing their role as nurturer. Another fear is that people will stigmatize their children if they find out their mom is living with HIV.*

agnosis will prevent us from ever having another one. Or, if we become involved with someone who isn’t giving us what we need, or is violent, we think we have to stay in the relationship because no one else will want us,” said Laster.

“Another fear is that if we have children, they might come home repeating negative things they’ve heard at school or in the community about HIV and AIDS,” she continued. “It makes a mother think twice about opening up to her kids to explain her situation. And if the children do know, what kind of treatment will they receive

from others who might find out their mom is living with HIV? So, being a woman and testing positive presents a lot of personal issues.”

## Facing an HIV+ Diagnosis

Laster is convinced that the best way to reduce stigma is to bring the issue out in the open, and to educate those affected as well as the general public about what the disease is and isn’t and the treatments available. She leads by example, proving that many people, like herself, are enjoying full, productive and fulfilling lives despite their HIV-positive status. But coming to terms with a diagnosis is never easy, especially in the beginning.

“I believe everyone must go through a grieving process,” said Laster. “Receiving a positive diagnosis is

devastating and it's life-changing. Of course you need to inform your sexual partner right away so he or she can be tested, but other than that, I advise waiting before informing family members, friends or co-workers. First, you need to become informed and learn how to take care of yourself. What does this diagnosis mean to you? Where does your life go from here? Once you move through the initial grief, then you can selectively share the information with others. You want to protect yourself so that if you receive a negative reaction, it doesn't push you into a depression. If we, as HIV positive women, become OK with ourselves, then we can teach other people how to treat us."

Laster continued, "Following my diagnosis, I participated in as many educational workshops as I could so I wouldn't be scared of myself. Once I found out how to take care of me and how to protect those around me, then I knew I was ready to move forward and share that information with others. If I had disclosed my status while I was afraid, I might have projected that fear onto others, causing them to be afraid of me. So, I

held onto that information until I was more comfortable with myself. And when I did disclose, I didn't receive the negative reactions I was expecting."

### Countering Fears & Isolation

Laster credits her counselors for helping her move forward from the moment of her diagnosis. She said that one of the most important things they did was to

immediately make a doctor's appointment for her, so when she left the clinic, she knew what her next step was going to be. They also contacted a community-based organization and connected Laster to a support group for people living with HIV.

"It meant a lot to me to go to the support group and realize I wasn't the only one dealing with HIV," said Laster. "I also went to as many informational meetings as I could to educate myself about living with HIV. I think it all goes back to that initial link to care my counselor made for me that got me

on the right track. It's so important for counselors to deliver the diagnosis with compassion because what they are saying changes someone's life forever.



*I learned everything I could about HIV so I wouldn't be afraid of myself. I learned how to take care of me and how to protect those around me. When we, as HIV positive women, become OK with ourselves, then we can show others how to treat us.*



*“When a person with HIV/AIDS is treated as if she’s done something wrong, when she’s viewed as being somehow morally compromised, how can we expect her to get tested and disclose her diagnosis to others?”*

*- President Barack Obama*

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“And to make that first doctor’s appointment and connect the client with a counselor and a support group helps the person realize that they are not alone. There’s someone who is already helping them.”

“Federal agencies report that the rate of HIV transmission in women has gone down by about 20%. So that’s a good thing, but we are still challenged with the stigma and unique barriers that come with HIV for women,” said Diallo. “We must continue our efforts to help women become more empowered and more assertive about protecting themselves, whether it’s practicing safer sex, getting tested, or knowing their partner’s status. Just because the transmission rate is going down doesn’t mean we can now turn and look somewhere else and do something else. We need to stay focused until we get those numbers to zero in terms of transmission.”

Laster is doing her part. “If I can help another woman to not have the experience of getting an HIV diagnosis and having to take medication on a daily basis ... if I can do anything to prevent another woman from contracting this disease ... that’s what drives me every day.”



*“One way to tackle stigma is to support people living with HIV who choose to be open about their status. When people live openly, others realize, wait a minute, the humanity of my cousin supersedes the stigma of HIV. The humanity of my co-worker or my daughter or my son or my best friend supersedes the stigma of HIV. The more we know specific people living with HIV, then the less prejudice we will have against people in general living with HIV. So, it’s critical for us to continue to lift up the powerful role that HIV positive people can play in helping us not only destroy the stigma, but end the epidemic itself.”*

*- Dazon Dixon Diallo, MPH  
SisterLove Founder/President*

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