



HIV/AIDS – A Personal Account

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What is HIV? HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. AIDS stands for Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome. A person living with HIV is less capable of fighting infection because the virus weakens the immune system.

As I write this documentary account today, I am a person living with HIV, born and raised in the Kenyan uplands where sex education is never presented, unlike 1st world countries such as the United States. All we learned in school was the difference between a girl and a boy when puberty begins. When our teachers or parents talked about protection, their fear was that a young girl getting pregnant would bring burden to the family and drop out of school. Nothing was ever mentioned about the risks of HIV/AIDS. This epidemic is mostly affecting young people through rape, child molestation or having sex with an infected person unknowingly. A lot of people live unaware of their status because the symptoms don't show right away. According to different studies, a HIV positive person can stay healthy for up to 10 years before showing any sign of sickness.

Since the time I was diagnosed with HIV all my dreams died. I live a difficult life with a lot of stress and depression. I thought of suicide and started preparing for my coffin. It comes to my mind everyday and affects me socially, mentally and physically. In Kenya, HIV medication is a luxury with access unlikely. Taking medication is not a cure either; they are full of side effects, fatigue, sweats, abdominal pain and diarrhea. What a miserable life.

Reports have shown that one can contract HIV at any age. For those born with HIV it's so unfortunate since you never got a chance to protect yourself, although you can protect against re-infection (getting infected by another strain). A person living with HIV is at high risk of getting other diseases like; tuberculosis (TB), high blood pressure, kidney disease, liver failure, skin disease, nervous system problems and flu and common colds as well.

One piece of advice I can give you as a young person, when a girl is raped or a boy is molested, please report it. I emphasize on this because this is something that happened to me when I was only twelve years old; I kept quiet and never revealed the secret. This is something that our parents can't imagine is happening and I urge you if something of the sort ever happens to you, please report it to whoever you really trust who can fight for you. Most of these evil acts

and inappropriate behaviors can be performed to you by: friends, relatives or strangers.

In our country, we always believe that only the poor, skinny, bony-legged, prostitutes and those who live in slums like Kibera and Mathare can get or have the virus. Through my own experience, this is UNTRUE AND MISLEADING. A person with HIV/AIDS can be anyone: lawyers, bankers, cabinet ministers, doctors, people from the church including born again Christians, handsome men/women, clerks and retailers - anyone can be a victim including those who live in affluent places like Muthaiga, Lavington, Runda etc. It's hard to point out anyone with HIV and also a big problem to ask your boy/girlfriend to get tested before having sex. Those who have white-collar jobs look healthy and it becomes harder to suspect they have the disease because they can afford medication that boosts their immune system. Whether you afford those medications or not you live with the virus, it is not a cure.

In our country, we all believe that if a woman carries a condom in her purse/handbag, it's prostitution. Most prostitutes protect themselves by carrying condoms with them all the time; in this case their chances of getting infected are low. I am 29 years old now and I grew up with the same darkness that exists today...lack of "Sex Education". Our churches never want to tell the youth the truth; they talk about "abstinence". This is one way of protection but chances are very high of engaging in unsafe and risky behavior. For young girls, if your boyfriend asks you for sex, the first thing is to ask him to use a condom. If he doesn't want to use a condom, it is time to end the relationship. Don't negotiate, or allow "sweet talk" to change your mind because the fact remains, men bring their power, force and don't like using a condom. I know this is hard for you to believe and accept but a man who does not want to use a condom to protect the life of his girlfriend has no respect for you, no matter what words he may tell you! The bottom line is that your life is in your hands. It is not crazy to tell you these things, but love is cooperation. You can end up with a painful, secret life I live today. I am traumatized and will suffer the rest of my life. Life with HIV is lonely, isolated and you become an outcast to society. Nobody wants you when they learn you are HIV positive, always discriminated against and stigmatized.

I never had this kind of information presented to me nor imagined such a thing could happen to me after growing up in a Christian family, a born-again Christian since I was young and meeting pastors at our home as they came to spend the night. I never had any immoral life and it happened to me so why not you.

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