

After 25 years of marriage the Aids virus threatens a family. A woman tells her My husband gave me HIV

I am an unlikely person to have HIV: a middle-aged woman, married with two grown-up children; doing some voluntary and paid work; about to take up training for a new profession. In August I learnt that my husband had Aids. I gave myself a month to recover from the shock before taking the test myself.

I feel impelled to write about the impact of this discovery on my life both as a personal catharsis and to reassure those of you who fear you might have the virus but dread even more a bad result of the test. There is hope. The hope does not lie in miracle drugs, though they would undoubtedly be welcome and save lives, but in what those with HIV can do for themselves. As long as newspapers talk of Aids and dying, people will feel they have nothing to lose by living in ignorance of their condition. Those who might otherwise have gone for the test will wait, and in so doing lose valuable time — time they could have spent improving the quality of their lives; strengthening their immune systems; healing themselves.

Lying awake at night with panic sweeping through me with the force of a hurricane was harder to bear than knowing. I reasoned thus: if I am HIV positive then not taking the test will not make me anything other than positive — I will still be that. If I do not have the virus, then the sooner I know that the better.

My husband was opposed to the idea of my being tested. My son was in despair at the prospect of losing both parents and only wanted to know that one of us at least was not going to die. My daughter gave her support.

The marriage counsellor we had been seeing for a year gave us valuable support and advice: get specialist help; join Body Positive (an HIV-support group); do the Aids Mastery course (run by Northern Lights — a group of actors with therapy training).

I ran back and forth like a headless chicken between the Terrence Higgins Trust, London Lighthouse and University College Hospital counsellors until I was sure about taking the test. I sat composed while the sample was taken and then — it must have been seeing my blood in the syringe, thinking of my children — I exploded in tears.

That evening I joined the Aids Mastery weekend at London Lighthouse. Like making a parachute drop into enemy territory, I left the safety of my prejudices, abandoned my inhibitions, and entered a roomful of gay men. I cried as I told my story — there were many worse than mine — and we supported one another. Many times that weekend I was reminded of Blanche Dubois in *Streetcar Named Desire* who, unhappy and alone, depended on the "kindness of strangers".

We learnt about the choices we had that we were not powerless. We learnt to be in touch with our feelings, to think clearly, make the right decisions, stay in control of our situation. Stress being one of the prime precipitators of Aids (it weakens the body's defences) we learnt to relax, the importance of keeping fit, eating well and improving relationships.

There now followed 10 days when life was suspended. All thoughts led to a slip of paper from the laboratory with my result on it. I was not consoled to know that there was only a 10 to 30 per cent chance of being antibody-positive. "Don't on any account go alone," said one who had.

My daughter insisted on coming with me that Monday to get the result. After a silent wait we went in. "Positive," the consultant said. She was, like the rest of the team, an impressive professional and a human being. She tucked her mouth into her face to brace herself. I could feel my cheeks swelling, getting redder and redder, and my head hurt with the effort of taking in this stunning news.

Then I looked up and saw my daughter's face at the far corner of the room — tiny and crumpled and colourless. I knew as I touched her that I would not stop, would not waste a moment — that I would fight with every cell in my body to



rid myself of the virus. I thought of derelicts who walked on hot coals and put skewers through their cheeks without harm. I remembered that Solzhenitsyn had cured himself of cancer. I could do it.

The two health advisers gave us tea, and talked. I did not want to take the drug AZT, which is prescribed for those who are HIV positive — I wanted to cure myself holistically. There were healers, they said, but beware of charlatans. Where some in the medical profession would have been dismissive and wanted me to be dependent — play "victim" — they were supportive and went off to photostat an article on healing for me. I was encouraged to return for counselling or a check-up whenever I wanted it.

My daughter and I had a counselling session booked with John Shine, immediately after my diagnosis, at London

Lighthouse — the first Aids hospice. We clung to one another beyond tears for most of an hour. Every day for the rest of that week John "read" my feelings and helped me to express them. "I'm not angry with my husband," I said, feeling that to allow anger at his carelessness, at the betrayal of my trust, would destroy family cohesion. He said nothing, but suggested I might like to have a go at some telephone directories. For this I sat on a futon, donned heavy-duty suede gloves, took up a section of thick rubber tubing and faced the *Yellow Pages*. It was some time before I had the courage to be savage with them.

"Go on — they can't hear you! What would you like to say to him? ... What would you like to say to ~~me~~ and ~~me~~ and ~~me~~ about ME!!!!" I banged and roared and sobbed, but needed constant reassurance and encouragement to keep at it. It was

hot, exhausting work. And then my eye caught, in bold black type, NAUGHTY LUNCHES AT THE GASLIGHT, and I began to laugh. We shared the joke till the thought that this was an experience now denied to me stung me into yelling "NAUGHTY LUNCH AT THE GASLIGHT!"

There were other times when I lay and hugged a pillow and cried into it while John sat silent — a protective presence. Or I had a tantrum, kicking and throwing myself around like a child. He showed me how to scream into a cushion if I was at home and did not want to be heard. Always, at the end of a session, there was a hug. This treatment helped keep me buoyant, energetic, determined. Without it I have no doubt that I would have become mentally ill.

It is hard at first to resist the urge to tell everyone you meet — to talk endlessly about the tumultuous feelings you are somehow managing to contain. But you must. The professionals counsel caution in the first few weeks — not to do anything impulsive. To wait until you have adjusted to the news before deciding who you will tell — some may not be able to cope and you will have to prop them up; they might even, if they are not tried and trusted friends, reject you. Most of my friends and family were about to go on holiday and I could not have them sobbing into the sand.

My oldest friend was around. I was tempted to tell her — but was it fair to place such a burden on her? One day we sat on a bench on the South Bank, overlooking the river, and we cried and we laughed at the Gothic absurdity of it all. I felt a great weight leave me as I told her.

During the next few weeks, as those we had selected were told, the guilt at causing so much distress mounted. It was very tiring — the explanations, trying to reassure and console them — but it was heart-warming to know so many cared and wanted to help.

Not everyone with the virus is as fortunate. I was aware at times of a difference in attitude towards me as a "straight" woman, infected by her husband — of being labelled "innocent". The implication was that gays are guilty. But it is a virus and no respecter of persons. Anyone who is sexually active can catch it.

Ten days after my result, I began seeing a healer. A woman I had met at the Aids Mastery course had told me about her, and I had satisfied myself that she was not a charlatan, but trained as an aromatherapist and psychotherapist, and that she was known to the professional Aids organisations. I was impressed when I spoke to her on the phone. She said she did not do the work — I did. I was rigid with tension and not sleeping, so she began by giving me aromatherapy with essential oils, and then put me into a state of deep relaxation using hypnosis. I had to write down all my past bad experiences so they could be obliterated under hypnosis; note my dreams and any thoughts that came to me during meditation and relaxation. Morning and evening I took baths with essential oils to relax and heal the body. Autosuggestion — the method propounded by Dr Emil Coué of talking the subconscious into health — was the way I would turn myself to antibody-negative — I had to be positive, to believe I could do it.

My moods changed inexplicably from day to day: from elation at being alive, at one with the world — to overwhelming loneliness and grief. My heart felt raw with hurt. It was an increasing strain to be with people who did not know, but with friends there was a feeling of closeness and warmth. I felt free to be myself in a way I had never felt before.

Deep fears surfaced at times in disconcerting ways. One day, in a fit of anger I was banging an old tin tray on the kitchen tiles when it tore and cut my thumb, and I watched in horror as this dangerous contaminated fluid oozed out. That night I dreamt that I dropped spittle on a friend's food and she refused to eat it. Gradually this feeling of being a leper, of being a threat to other people, has gone.

It is two months now since my diagnosis. I have been back to University College Hospital for a blood test and thorough check-up, with excellent results. The panic has subsided and my heart returned to its old rhythm. My husband and I are parting, and I feel sad at leaving him and going to live alone — at the strains it has put on us as a family. But I have learnt so many fascinating things about illness — how the mind and body behave, how to be more "right-brained", less ruled by rationality. Above all, I am grateful that my own response — to fight — has found such wonderful allies in professionals, family and friends. I have a future. You do not have to die of Aids.

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The first symptoms of HIV infection
HOW can people tell when they become infected with the Aids vi-
counter. The incubation period ranged from 11 to 25 days and
Dr Gaines, writing in the British Medical Journal, says that these are important differences

Dangers from balloons

Update

your driving or interact with alcohol. The BMA Guide to Medicines and Drugs (1988) is published by Dorting Kindersley, price £15.00.

are not listed separately by the DMO treatment.