



LEGACY



HELPING INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH HIV & DATING

HIV and Mental Health

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For individuals living with HIV, dating can be fearful. Let's be real, dating in general is fearful for most individuals but now you add HIV into the mix and it can sometimes feel like more baggage on baggage.

This handbook is designed to assist you in helping ease your client's minds when it comes to dating or as some call it, "Relationships after HIV." In this context, relationship can be whatever your client defines it as, such as dating, hooking up, monogamy, polyamory, and so on.

Hear Them

You want to demonstrate that you hear what they are saying and how they feel. This can be done through a technique we call *Active Listening*.



What is Active Listening?

Active listening is when you purposefully work to hear not only what the person is saying but try to understand the root of the message being expressed.³

Things you want to **avoid** when practicing active listening³:

- ▶ Getting distracted
- ▶ Forming counter arguments
- ▶ Allowing yourself to get bored

A few key active listening techniques include³:

1. Pay Attention³

- ▶ Give them your undivided attention
- ▶ Look at them directly
- ▶ "Listen" to their body language

2. Show That You're Listening³

- ▶ Use your body language and gestures to show you're listening
- ▶ Nod occasionally
- ▶ Be mindful of your posture and make sure it's open and inviting
- ▶ Use minimal verbal comments like, "Yes," and "Uh huh"



3. Provide Feedback³

- ▶ Remember your role as listener is simply to show you understand what is being said. The best tool for this is **reflection**.
 - ▷ Reflect by paraphrasing, “What I’m hearing is...” or “Sounds like you’re saying...”
 - ▷ You can ask questions to clarify, “What do you mean when you say...” or “...is this what you mean?”
 - ▷ Reflect by summarizing what you hear periodically.

4. Avoid Judgement³

- ▶ Remember do not interrupt the client; this could limit them sharing
- ▶ Allow them to finish their point before reflecting or asking questions.
- ▶ No counter arguments or judgmental language

5. Respond Appropriately³

- ▶ Remember you are working to gain information and perspective.
- ▶ Respectfully be open and honest in your response.
- ▶ Treat them in a way that you think they would want to be treated

This information was derived from an article on MindTools. A link to the article can be found at the end of this handbook, under “Helpful Links,” as well as a link for a video of Active Listening in action!

Active listening provides a space for clients to feel heard, validated and understood.

Work to normalize that it is only human to feel hesitant to take the risk of dating or really having a relationship of any kind when you are living with HIV.

Some of the most identified internal conflicts include:

- ▶ Fear of being judged or rejected
 - ▶ Fear of being discriminated against
 - ▶ Fear of transmission
 - ▶ Fear of stigma.
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ACTIVITY TIME

Why don't people disclose?

Imagine that there was a fact about you that if shared could result in the loss of your family, friends, and other loved ones.

For individuals living with HIV, that statement is, "I'm HIV positive."

This is why some of the emotional challenges associated with HIV/AIDS include:

- ▶ Shame, Embarrassment
- ▶ Anger, Fear, Guilt
- ▶ Denial, Isolation
- ▶ Grief, Resentment
- ▶ Uncertainty of future

Which leads us into the next topic...



Self-Exploration

Clients often focus externally (e.g., what will others think, who would want to be intimate with me, how do I tell others I'm living with HIV) that they forget to connect with themselves and where they stand when it comes to dating. Because grief is a normal and natural part of this self-exploration it's important to allow them space to process their grief.

Explore their attitude about dating and having a relationship.

1. Am I even ready for a relationship?
2. Why do I want to be in a relationship?
3. What do I think about dating?
4. What kind of relationship do I want?

It's important to be comfortable with YOURSELF and confident in YOUR abilities to meet your own needs.¹ This is easier said than done.

Client Tips

Here are some tips to remind client's to help build their comfort and confidence within themselves:

- ▶ **Build yourself up.**¹ You are not your diagnosis. Focus on building yourself (physically, mentally, and emotionally) into a person you would want to be in a relationship with; this includes friendships.
- ▶ **Build a strong friendship network.**¹ Friends help provide a strong foundation that allows for a better position to be open to a relationship. The best relationships begin as friendships.
- ▶ **Shift your focus.** Have you ever been working on a problem and found yourself coming up with the same wrong answer so you try and try again, back to back, only to come up with the same wrong answer? Sometimes, we have to take our eyes off the situation. When you focus too much on something, you can end up getting in your own way.¹ Instead of saying, I need my "forever" person, maybe make it a point to simply focus on the quality of your life.
- ▶ **Just be you.**¹ You are enough. Let the world see your light. When you are happy for yourself, living on your terms, this confidence will be that much more attractive to others.
- ▶ **HAVE FUN!**¹ Make it about getting to know others, share smiles, and make the day enjoyable. This may not seem like a lot but it helps take the pressure off you.

If after trying some of these things your client still seems to struggle with their comfort and confidence they may need to explore this further with a counselor. There is no specific time limit on someone building their self-worth or self-esteem each case is individual and its okay to talk to a counselor.

If your client feels ready to date or seek a relationship there are some things they may want to explore²:

- ▶ Do I want to date another positive person? If so, where or how do I find someone?
 - ▷ There are many places (online and in person) to meet other people living with HIV: HIV-focused support groups, conferences, or dating websites such as www.pozmatch.com, www.hivpeoplemeet.com, www.positivesingles.com, and many more to name a few.
- ▶ If the other person's status does not matter, they can focus on more traditional methods, such as, singles events, church, mainstream dating website/apps, or networking through friends.

Ok, so they found someone and it just so happens they're HIV negative...now what?



Disclosure Declaration

Declaring something is about empowering and owning your truth. Remind the client, they are more than their status. However, disclosing to someone that you're living with HIV can be stressful and scary.

DISCLOSURE = DECLARATION

Clients may ask you, "When is the right time to disclose my status?" It's important to remember there is no right or wrong time to disclose.

Some say:

- ▶ On your dating profile
- ▶ Before the first date
- ▶ On the first date
- ▶ Only when you're emotionally ready
- ▶ Only when you're about to engage in behavior that may put the other at risk (such as sex)

Know that every situation is different and you don't have to tell everybody. Some people prefer to be upfront with their status, others prefer to wait until they get to know someone. You have a right to your privacy.

Remind the client of the legal obligations they may have to disclose their status to their partners prior to engaging in sex, with or without a condom. For some states, not disclosing can result in criminal charges.



Disclosure Tips

In an article by David Artavia about disclosure, he outlines the following to consider that may be helpful for you to share with your client⁴:

1. **Are They Worth It?** Some people aren't worth a second date much less the privilege of knowing your status. Be selective with who you disclose to.
2. **If it's True, Say "I'm Undetectable."** Yes, you're living with HIV but remember if you are undetectable you have zero chance of transmitting HIV (Refer to next section for information on "U = U" under "[Treatment as Prevention for] Safer Sex.>"). While HIV may be a part of you, it is NEVER WHO YOU ARE.
3. **Show Passions First.** You know how you tell your date what you do for a living and what you hope to do with your life or what dreams you have? Well, you can tie in your status with these! An example would be, "Something I'm super passionate about is educating people about HIV..."
4. **Be on Your Own Team.** A huge part of caring for yourself goes BEYOND your diagnosis and treatment. It's about loving yourself. Rejection is something we all fear, especially in the beginning. The funny thing about fear is that it's a coward and when you look a coward in the face, it runs away.
5. **Ask Them First.** Turn the table and ask about their status FIRST. This helps the person be more present when you disclose your status.

For a personal video of HIV disclosure, a link can be found at the end of this handbook under "Helpful Links". In this video Lexi Gibson, addresses the main points of disclosing her status. It is very insightful and knowledgeable.

[Treatment as Prevention for] Safer Sex

Not only can sex be enjoyable but SAFE! Education is key to easing client's worries about being sexually active.

First, remind them the goal of their HIV medication is to stop the virus from being able to replicate (making more copies of itself) inside the body, thus increasing t-cell (CD4) count and decreasing their viral load. When their viral load is undetectable, it means the amount of virus in the body is so low that standard testing cannot detect it at the time of testing. This is where "U = U" comes into play.

"U = U" means "Undetectable = Untransmittable"

There is clear evidence demonstrating that when an individual has sustained an undetectable status they **CANNOT** transmit HIV to their sexual partner(s). This means if they are rigorously adherent to their HIV medication regimen the chance of transmitting HIV is virtually **ZERO**. For more information on "U = U", a link can be found at the end of this handbook under "Helpful Links" listed as **U = U Prevention Access Campaign** and **HIV Treatment as Prevention**.

Remind the client:

- ▶ The only way to determine if you are undetectable is to get a viral load test.
- ▶ It is possible to shift from undetectable to detectable.
- ▶ Factors that influence an increase in viral load in the body include: untreated sexually transmitted infections (STIs), fighting a cold/flu or other infection, and missing doses of HIV medications.

Consistent condom use is still one of the MOST effective ways to stop HIV transmission. Not only does condom use help stop HIV transmission, it helps decrease the client's risk of being infected with sexually transmitted infections. Remember, STIs may influence an increase in viral load in the body.

Remind the client:

- ▶ Even with an undetectable status it is important not only for them to but their partners to continue to maintain a regular STI testing schedule (every 3 months).

For some clients, they may have no knowledge of existing help for partners in mixed status (meaning one partner is positive and the other negative). For these couples, it is beneficial to educate them on **Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis** or **PrEP**.

- ▶ PrEP is a pill taken daily by the HIV negative partner that has shown to prevent HIV infection by 92-99%.
- ▶ This in combination between someone positive who is undetectable and someone negative and on PrEP has shown that the risk of transmission is **EXTREMELY** low.

What happens if there is an accident and a condom breaks? Inform the client about **Post-Exposure Prophylaxis** or **PEP**.

- ▶ PEP can help prevent HIV if an unexpected exposure happens.
- ▶ The person must act quickly as PEP is most effective if taken within 72 hours of exposure and has shown to be even more effective if taken sooner.



The Takeaway

To understand how we can help our clients, we first have to **HEAR THEM**. Truly hear what they are really saying. To do this you want to practice and strengthen your active listening skills.

Self-exploration for our clients helps them identify their personal struggle with self-worth and self-esteem. Reinforce that their status is NOT a reflection of their self-worth. Fear of rejection is normal for all of us, HIV positive or negative.

Everyone's process of **declaring** (disclosing) their HIV status is their personal choice. Again, rejection is a scary thing! Be selective with disclosure. Allow space to educate people and for them to ask questions.

Treatment as Prevention IS safer sex! Declare you're undetectable if you are with pride! Stand in your truth. We know **undetectable means untransmittable**. Sex and intimacy are not over just because you are living with HIV.

Remind the client of the qualities needed to be fully loved:

- ▶ **Courage** to be their authentic selves.
- ▶ **Bravery** to reject "good enough". They don't have to settle!
- ▶ **Faith** that they are worthy of love just the way they are. You are enough!
- ▶ **Guts** to put yourself out there.
- ▶ **Self-awareness** to know when you are selling yourself short.

Living with HIV does not have to be a barrier to intimacy.

A counselor can help you work through your anxieties, fears, and needs.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Helpful Links

Active Listening Article by MindTools

<https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>

“Improve Your Listening Skills with Active Listening” by Mindtools Videos

<https://youtu.be/t2z9mdX1j4A>

“Breaking Down HIV Disclosure” by Lexi Gibson

https://youtu.be/9f9_5mJNGIY

U = U Prevention Access Campaign

<https://www.preventionaccess.org/>

HIV Treatment as Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/risk/art/index.html>

Resources

Legacy Counseling Center

www.legacycares.org

HIV Pos Mag

www.HIVPosMag.com

POZ

www.poz.com

The WellProject

www.thewellproject.org

The Body: The Complete HIV/AIDS Resource

www.thebody.com

The Body: The Complete HIV/AIDS Resource (En Español)

<http://www.thebody.com/espanol.html?ic=3001>

References

¹McClain, G. (2015, June 16). 5 Tips for Finding True Love When You Have HIV. Retrieved October 23, 2018, from <https://www.hivplusmag.com/just-diagnosed/mental-health/2015/06/16/5-tips-finding-true-love-when-you-have-hiv>

²Dating and HIV. (2018, December 05). Retrieved October 23, 2018, from <https://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/dating-and-hiv>

³Mind Tools. (n.d.). Active Listening: Hear What People are Really Saying. Retrieved December 23, 2018, from <https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>

⁴Artavia, D. (2017, June 12). How to Disclose Your Status on a First Date. Retrieved October 24, 2018, from <https://www.hivplusmag.com/sex-dating/2017/6/12/how-disclose-your-status-first-date>

LEGACY COUNSELING CENTER
4054 McKinney Ave, Suite 102
Dallas, TX 75204

Phone (214) 520-6308
Email jose@legacycounseling.org



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www.legacycares.org