

# Sharing the news: Dating when you have an illness

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BOB KATZ has been living with HIV for nearly three decades. He has been in a loving relationship with an HIV negative man for the last nine of those years. They met online, and Katz says his HIV status was one of the first things he wrote about in his profile.

"If someone's going to reject me for having HIV, I'd rather find out early than a few dates in," says Katz, 59, of San Francisco.

Katz's approach was upfront and honest. But breaking the news of a serious illness or condition to a potential partner can be tricky and overwhelming, whether you have HIV, cancer or an auto immune disorder. The mind races with unknowns: How will my date react? Will he reject me?

Psychologists and health experts say there's no right or wrong way to share the news. How and when you do it depends on your personality, but the budding relationship has a

better chance of surviving the subsequent emotional challenges if you are open and honest.

Still, disclosure is a very individual behavior, says Carol Campbell, a Palo Alto marriage and family therapist. Some people are guarded and private, so they're going to wait until what they feel is the best possible moment while others move quickly and like to put it all out there, she explains.

"They might think that their diagnosis is the most important thing about them, but I can't think of a faster way for someone to lose interest than if you think of yourself as a disease," Campbell says. "Let them get to know you first, not your disease." California law states that any person who exposes another to HIV by engaging in unprotected sexual activity is guilty of a felony, when the infected person knows he is infected, has not disclosed his HIV-positive status, and acts with the intent to infect the other person with HIV, according to the California Department of Public Health.

Katz's partner, John, was supportive and well-informed about HIV and safe sex, Katz says. It was not an issue for him. But, not everyone's reaction is as positive.

As the epidemic hits its 30th year, an HIV diagnosis isn't the death sentence it once was, says Mallory Johnson, an associate professor of medicine at the UCSF Center for AIDS Prevention. People with HIV are living longer, falling in love and getting married. But it doesn't mean that the societal stigma is gone, he adds.

"On the part of the HIV positive person, there is an immense fear of rejection and fear that the partner will blame them for their condition or be afraid that they are contagious," he says.

That was Kaya Dzambic's experience. She'd been HIV positive for six years when she went on a date with a guy she met at work. They enjoyed a long walk and romantic dinner. The chemistry was great. At the end of the night, Dzambic mustered up the courage to tell the man about her diagnosis.

"We've had a very beautiful day together, and there's something I have to tell you," Dzambic, of Palo Alto, told him. "I am HIV positive. If you don't want to continue to get to know me, I understand." He seemed skittish, she says, but they shared multiple kisses and said good night.

"Later he called and said, 'Oh my god, I'm so freaked out. I think I got HIV from you,'" recalls Dzambic, now 48. Needless to say, there was no second date. "I don't think he was educated on the subject," she says. "He just panicked. But that has not stopped me from wanting to find love."

Life long diabetes also didn't stop Manteca's Susan D., who is 55 and asked to omit her last name for privacy. She has been married twice. But a recent multiple sclerosis diagnosis has made her self-conscious about getting out there, says Susan, who is currently single.

"The truth is I'm so afraid to bring it up," she says. She's been on a few dates, but they didn't go anywhere, so she remained tight-lipped. "Who would want to date me with these medical issues? Now that I have the multiple sclerosis, it's twice as bad. There must be someone out there who is in my situation."

To find out, Susan posted her profile on [Prescription4love.com](http://Prescription4love.com), a dating site for people living with medical conditions, from Attention Deficit Disorder to Tourette Syndrome. Founder Ricky Durham launched the Atlanta-based website in memory of his brother, who died in 2004 from complications related to Crohn's disease.

"Everything is upfront from the beginning," Durham says. "Some (people) have told me it's a way of connecting without having (to deal with) the big reveal."

When you do reveal your condition, make sure you trust the person enough with this personal and sensitive information, Campbell says. And, have resources in your mind if he or she wants to learn more.

Trust is the biggest issue for Katherine Sapp, who has had epilepsy since 2001. If she has a seizure, the person with her must play a role in her immediate care, like making sure she gets to a quiet place where she can lie down. She says it took three months to share the news with the man she's currently dating.

"I'm not comfortable sharing the information with someone until I trust them enough with the emotional toll it (epilepsy) has taken on me," says Sapp, 31, of Oakland. "But it (telling someone) is always a bigger deal in my head than it is to other people."

When trust is in place and a relationship develops, there can be tremendous love, support, tenderness, and even a stronger bond as a result of sharing the news, Campbell says.

"You may worry about your partner's health or whom to tell outside of the relationship, but the gate has become open to talk about your other differences," she adds.

Michael Howey of Alameda considers himself an open and "straight up" person. Still, after living with stage four kidney cancer for five years, he's not always sure how and when to broach the subject.

Howey, 53, had mixed reactions, but the most positive and uplifting came from an ex-girlfriend. He told her on their fourth date. They were walking around Oakland's Lake Merritt, holding hands, when he broke the news. "There's something I should tell you," Howey recalls. "I have terminal cancer." Her reaction put him at ease.

"As long as you're here now and we can enjoy each other, it's no big deal," she assured him. "No one is promised tomorrow."

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