

POSITIVELY WOMEN

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growing older
positively

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One of the advantages I thought, of starting a love affair in your 50s, was not having to bother with contraception. When I started a new relationship five years ago at the age of 51, I assumed, because of my age, that condoms were a complication I could do without.

It may have briefly crossed my mind to use them at first but somehow I didn't and having started off not using them, it was easy to carry on.

I had been a single parent for 20 years – and celibate for 10 – so that sex with a man was exciting and frightening enough. Fiddling about with a condom as well was just too much.

Besides, I was a 1970s woman. I had never used condoms in my 20s and 30s. Nobody used them much then. So it didn't come naturally to me.

Anyway, I suppose I assumed that women in their '50s simply didn't get HIV from middle-aged, middle-class lovers. How wrong I was. A year ago, at 55, I found out that some do.

When I met Paul I was just starting to live as a single woman again. My son, Tom, was in his final year at university and had more or less left home. I had a well-paid job (with a sexual health organisation, ironically enough), and a new chapter in my life was opening up.

After so many years as a single woman I must have been hungrier for a relationship than I realised. I wanted to see Paul as the perfect lover, and the possibility of HIV never crossed my mind.

As a 1970s feminist – liberal about sex – I had quite a matter-of-fact attitude to sexual infections.

They were no big deal. Most were treatable with antibiotics and curable.

I unthinkingly carried these attitudes with me into the 1990s. The worst infections I thought I might catch were thrush, cystitis or herpes.

My relationship with Paul lasted nearly three years and ended nastily, when he dumped me suddenly, for someone else.

I had never felt so bad before. I suppose I had convinced myself that he loved me, so I couldn't believe what was happening. I was just beginning to get over him, a year later, when he persuaded me to get involved with him again.

Within weeks he had developed pneumonia. Anxious about him, I looked it up on the Internet after he was admitted to hospital. Although he didn't tell me, things clicked into place and I guessed he was HIV positive.

Soon afterwards I found out that I was too. Although I wanted to talk to him about it, he has refused to see me or talk to me since.

I phoned Positively Women the very day that I was diagnosed, in a state of grief and shock. I remember well the way Angelina talked to me, how she comforted me and even, incredibly, made me laugh.

Days later, several copies of the newsletter arrived by post, with a note scribbled on one which featured her face on the cover, "This is me!" She guessed correctly that I was fearful of how long-term positive women might look, and she knew what to do to reassure me.

Knowing the effect of my diagnosis on my son Tom was the greatest source of pain in those early days. I felt that I had brought a shadow into his life, that needn't have been there.

Older sensitive

BY CARLA

Although he has been unfailingly loving and supportive since, the sadness and regret I felt about the effect on him hasn't gone away.

It's odd being an older woman new to living with HIV. I feel how incongruous it is. I think I look a very ordinary middle-aged woman with short hair and glasses.

Not sexy and therefore not, I am sure, most people's stereotype of an HIV positive person. People associate HIV with high levels of sexual activity. I remember saying to a friend "But I've had hardly any sex in my life!"

What I meant was that I had not yet had a truly loving long-term sexual relationship with anyone. And I didn't know now if I ever would.

I suppose there can be more of a sense of failure in being diagnosed in middle age. Older should mean wiser. You're supposed to set an example, not be so foolish.

At our age, we should know better. And then there's the ageist assumption that getting HIV in middle age shouldn't matter so much because we've already had a chance to live our lives.

It matters, of course, as much as it does to anyone. None of us wanted this to happen to us. We all want to live forever.

It's hard to know which aches and pains belong to HIV and which belong simply to growing older.

When I think that I look pale and wan, feel stiffer, get more forgetful, it's easy to worry that this is something to do with the virus instead of something that would have happened anyway, as I have to keep reminding myself.

I have retreated into being non-sexual. It's what I used to do anyway (which is why I was so naïve during that last passionate affair). I don't like it

but maybe it would always have seemed the safer option as I got older.

This may change. In many ways HIV has made the fighter in me more fiercely committed to living fully and to being true to myself.

So what's on the positive side for us older women? Well, in spite of everything most of us are a bit wiser so maybe we're better able to deal with all the emotions that HIV brings.

Maybe we can be clearer about what's really important. Maybe we have more friends around us, lead more settled, secure lives. Maybe, having spent years looking after others, some of us have more time to look after ourselves.

My HIV diagnosis came at a time of life when I was taking stock and facing up to my mortality anyway.

I have found that, in an odd sort of way, HIV has given new purpose and energy to this part of my life. It has put everything into perspective. I no longer feel depressed about being single or getting older.

I'm grateful for being in the world, living in it moment to moment. And I am proud of the way that I have dealt with my diagnosis.

I have found strength of character in myself that I did not know I had, which has led to a new kind of self-respect and respect for all my positive sisters. **PW**



photo: Israel Times

Wishing, hoping and planning

BY TINA

Growing older is a fact of life, but how it's done really does depend on the individual – personally I want to grow old disgracefully.

I never thought I would be a 50-plus positive woman, at least not positive in relation to this article anyway.

We all know that HIV doesn't discriminate, but trying to be 'positive' (pardon the pun!) about the 'older' woman's situation hasn't been an easy ride for me.

I've had to cope with being 50-plus and – after the marriage to a younger man and the subsequent break up, the affair with a guy half my age and the menopausal symptoms – I'm now nearing my 56th birthday.

I don't feel 55. I'm always being told I look 45. I've inherited my mother's zest for life, optimistic attitude and good skin and bone structure.

I try to preserve my reasonably good health and 950-plus CD4 count. I eat well (luckily I love salads, vegetables and healthy foods), I also get plenty of sleep, rarely go out socialising on work days and am up by 6am most mornings and in bed (alone with the cat) by around 10pm.

Sometimes I feel my life is boring – all work and no play. Most of my close friends live miles away and to see them means a weekend away, which I try to turn into an adventure.

However, if I'm honest, I get lonely. I have no children – therefore no grandchildren – nor will I have any at this late age.

I remind myself I chose to remain childless, preferring to gain a degree as a mature student to being a mum. When you are younger you have ambitions to achieve, places to see etc, etc.

I can honestly say much of what I strove for has been achieved – but at something of a cost. I've been seen by the men I've been involved with as over independent, over ambitious and somewhat hard. But life has taught me many lessons during periods of bad luck and misfortune – the main one being 'believe in yourself'.

To be told you are HIV positive is bad enough at any age, but I see myself as a person with experience enough to try and cope with what is happening to me.

Maybe sometimes I still get stressed out and see areas of my life I would like to change, but I cannot change my status, so it grows older as a part of me.

When I was first diagnosed I remember my doctor at the clinic reminding me of the plus points relative to my age – how my CD4 count was high, viral load lowish and given these facts – the chances were I would be able to live a relatively 'normal' life well into old age.

OK, so at least I'm not facing a lifetime of medical regimes but I'm also going through the menopause. Sometimes I wonder if the symptoms are those of the virus or part of the natural age progression that we women face.

I've got a growing list of 'things to do before 60' (not so many years left to go there!). I take pleasure in each day that passes, trying to enjoy life to the full, dressing and acting in the bohemian way that's followed me from teenage to middle age.

There's no man in my life I wait to mature with but like everything else on my agenda, I'm wishing and hoping and planning!!

Love Tina **PW**



artwork: Isobel Tims