



Positive Women's
Network

The Positive Side

Positive Women's Network
www.pwn.bc.ca www.pwn-wave.ca

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HIV & Me

Looking at Dark Things in the Light

by Eshe

It is almost impossible to say exactly how HIV came into my life. I have ruminated over it, and have now decided that it really does not matter. But I know it was from unprotected heterosexual contact, as I don't do drugs and have never had a transfusion.

As with most African women who get HIV, it is a disease of circumstance: relationships or need. There is the circumstance of the woman who believes she is in a monogamous relationship only to find out otherwise, and she is literally part of a harem. This is fuelled by the belief on the African continent that a man is entitled to more than one wife— polygamy and its snowball effect.

Then there is the circumstance of need. A single mother or young girl who has no work, income or support is left with no other option but to sell her body to feed herself and her family. Her aim is to influence the deepest pockets she can find, and protection from HIV is the furthest thing from her mind.

Both circumstances are intertwined. For example, take a man with two wives and a girlfriend. The girlfriend and wife #2 are faithful to the relationship, but wife #1 is disenchanted and takes on a lover who is positive. With time, wife #1, #2, girlfriend and the man all become positive. Down the line, girlfriend finds herself a husband. He becomes infected too and he possibly has a girlfriend, and is thinking of taking on a second wife! The sad thing is most of this occurs in pure ignorance. I feel the blatant disregard for the sense in the "one man one wife" doctrine is what has plunged Africa into such deep, dark, HIV despair.

I was diagnosed with the condition in 2001 as part of a routine pregnancy examination. Naturally, it was devastating, but it did explain some ailments. I was puzzled, as HIV was an area in which I had actively worked, delivering the message of protection to the grassroots communities with the USAID's condom program. My partner tested negative, which meant I had the condition prior to our five-year relationship. My natural instinct was to divorce, as I could not bear the thought of exposing someone I loved so dearly to the virus.

I worried about one of the pillars of marriage, sexuality, and how it would affect our lives. I pleaded for a separation but he insisted on remaining married to me.

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**The issue of stigma used to be on the dark side for me,
but I am working on pulling it into the light.**

In all fairness to him, he got me through my first year. For the first two years, I coped with the condition with blind, ignorant faith. To me it was simply a case of mind over matter. I refused to read or research the issues, and was determined to live life normally and to the fullest. I left the care to the hands of the outstanding staff at the Oak Tree Clinic and took my meds as directed, as well as a set of supplements. I am very lucky that I have had no side effects so far. I simply treat the condition like diabetes, arthritis or any other ailment. I feel I am fortunate, as I do not have any major dietary restriction or pain. All I have to do is maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Sadly, my marriage did fall apart. I had to recover from several years of agonizing mental and psychological abuse. Yet I felt strangely liberated. I researched HIV medications, therapies and issues. I rekindled my activism and interest in HIV. I had room in what had been a stifled spiritual life to pursue my divine beliefs. My motto became "Attitude of Gratitude."

I have discovered there is so much to be thankful for on a daily basis. I have come to realize that every trial or tribulation one goes through is for a strengthening and second chance. I believe that I will emerge from challenges stronger and more capable. I try to see the positive side of every situation.

HIV has wonderfully made me overcome the human vices of envy, covetousness and greed. I have come to realize one never really knows what other people are going through, even though their lives seem wonderful. I would not like to be in another person's shoes; I am quite happy with mine. They are mine, I know them well, and can live with them.

Like anyone else, I have my highs and lows, but they are not particularly impacted by my condition. I believe this is due to my foundational attitude of mind over matter, and my new found attitude of gratitude. The issue of stigma used to be on the dark side for me, but I have managed to pull it into the grey zone and I am still working on pulling it into the light. Just the mere fact that I am writing this piece, to be published, is part of that process.

Disclosure can be a long slow process. It is best not to be rushed or pressured into it. I have chosen not to disclose my status to friends or family because all they will do is worry and pity, sentiments I want to live without. As ignorance still prevails, I do not openly disclose my status, but I have come to a point where I am not overly concerned about who knows. Disclosure is best not to

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rush into, except where it is required by law (such as in sexual relationships).

There is a dark side, a side that I am constantly in battle with. HIV has an uncanny way of attacking self-esteem. When it comes to being in a relationship, it occurs subliminally and overtly. I have had constant questions like *would I really date this person if I didn't have HIV?* This perpetual probing left me devoid of relationship emotions. I found myself simply going through the

motions, mechanically saying the right things at the appropriate time.

Having HIV can be desperately lonely, with a deep fear of rejection and isolation, possibly followed by a wanton hunt for companionship. This can be a dangerous and painful road to traverse. I have had to stop and consciously step out and try to look at my situation as an onlooker would. I made notes, and had a lot to laugh at myself and cry helplessly about. To others, I say please seek support (formal or informal). Find an ear: a friend, a positive sister, a counselor and talk it out!

If your relationship's moving too swiftly, making your head spin, how do you know if it's for real? Avoid the desperate urge to barrel ahead, but don't fall into the trap of overanalyzing, just play it safe. A word of caution about the bitter sweetness of positive dating services. There the spectrum is full: creeps to princes, scam artists to saints. Though I applaud these services for filling a need, I implore all my sisters who trudge this path to triple their guard. Have a well thought out plan of action and don't settle for less. I now count myself lucky to have found a positive soul mate for whom I have the deepest respect.

I try to maintain a fairly healthy life style and managing stress is key, as it is with most people. To achieve this, I do "feel good" things for myself: get massages, soak in a tub of sizzling salts, pray, exercise and put on my attitude of gratitude.

For the newly diagnosed, it is so essential to cultivate the right attitude up front. It sets the stage and foundation for how you manage HIV. I say get a support structure, someone to listen and empathize. The first day, month, or year could be difficult without the right support structure. I recommend taking things easy, not trying to change too much too soon.

Disclosure can be a long slow process. It is best not to be rushed or pressured into it.

Remember, HIV or no HIV, you still have to live. Now there is even more reason to savour each day as a blessing. It is imperative to tell your partner of your status and do the best you can to protect others. For all, I urge you to explore your inner-self. Get to like your own company, laugh at yourself, pamper yourself. Day dream, and dare yourself to achieve— what do you have to lose?

HIV has made me a better person and has affected my life in a positive manner. It has not taken over my life and really does not matter on a day-to-day basis. Two things make me smirk: first, the ignorant tend to flee from those with HIV, not realizing it is I who needs to flee from them for fear of catching some opportunistic infection (especially in flu season). Second, at least I have a 90% idea of what is going to kill me. These odds are better than what most people can boast.

In my opinion: Attending an international conference is amazing

by Monique

When I first heard of the 2002 International AIDS Conference I thought of huge crowds of people and confusing scientific information. I had no interest in attending. But the draw of visiting Barcelona compelled me to submit a scholarship application.

I was awarded the scholarship and was pleasantly surprised by the whole experience.

Yes, there were huge crowds, but I managed to make a few very personal connections with women from around the globe - a few of whom I am still in contact with! There was absolutely a glut of information, but with a little bit of preparation I was able to organize my days around the workshops, lectures, and/or documentaries I wished to attend.

I shared lodging with a woman from Israel and our late night discussions expanded my perception of HIV/AIDS. She shared with me her experience of living with the virus and also of the work she does with HIV+ women in Israel. Knowing this woman helps me to focus outwards, to remember women in other parts of the world. Sometimes when I focus too much on my experience of living with HIV I become overwhelmed and depressed. But remembering others who are also living positive helps me to keep going.

One of the lectures I attended was about microbicides. Is that a new term for you? If it is, microbicides are essentially a substance (gel, film, cream, etc) that will be inserted vaginally to protect the user from HIV infection. They are not yet available, but they will be soon. I am very excited about microbicides because they will allow women to protect themselves when they can't negotiate condoms. The combination of

microbicides and condoms will offer the most protection. But if condom use is an area of conflict, microbicides will offer women prevention choices. It was at the 2002 International AIDS Conference in Barcelona where I first learned about them.

The next international conference will be held in Toronto next summer, 2006. I encourage you to submit an application to attend if you are in any way interested. Canadian scholarship applications are available online at <http://www.aids2006.org>. If you prefer, you can ask for a hard copy (paper form) from PWN and I can assist you in filling it out. Give it a try, you have nothing to lose.

Applying for a Scholarship

Scholarship applications for the International AIDS Conference in Toronto are now open to Canadian residents. If you're interested in attending the conference, here's your chance to apply for financial support.

Applications will be done via the Internet with a valid personal e-mail address. For more information, go to conference information online at www.aids2006.org. Look in the Scholarship information section.

For those who don't have access to the Internet, please phone us and we can arrange to send a paper copy to you. Call PWN at 604.692.3000 or 1.866.692.3001.

Deadline for application is February 22.

Risk of HIV Infection Increases During Pregnancy

Ronald Gray of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and colleagues compared HIV incidence rates among sexually active pregnant and lactating women in Uganda to incidence among sexually active nonpregnant and nonlactating women. The researchers found that the risk of HIV infection during pregnancy increases. Hormonal changes affecting the genital tract or immune

system, not changes in sexual behavior, likely are the cause of the increased risk, according to researchers. The researchers recommend targeted HIV prevention for pregnant women.

Source: Kaiser Daily AIDS Summaries Oct 03, 2005
Original source: Gray et al., Lancet, 10/1.

Improper Condom Use Leads to Increased Risk of Infection

New research shows that even sexually experienced condom users often don't use the contraceptive properly, resulting in an elevated risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Researchers looked at the condom use behaviors of more than 1,100 men and women who were treated at an STI clinic in the United States. The most common infection associated with incorrect use or breakage of the condom was gonorrhea in men.

Among the study participants, more than 15 per cent tested positive for gonorrhea, chlamydia, or both of these STIs.

Almost a quarter of the participants indicated they had made errors in using a condom during the last month, including:

- putting the condom on inside out and then flipping it over to have sex
- not leaving a space at the tip of the condom
- not holding the base during withdrawal
- reusing a condom
- starting to have sex and then putting the condom on.

Although the participants were quite sexually active - three quarters of them reported having six or more partners - more than half did not report using a condom during their last sexual encounter.

This study shows the importance of educating not just teenagers, but all sexually active people about the proper use of condoms. If you would like to learn more, check out www.sexualityandu.ca for an interactive demonstration on how to use a condom.

Source: October 2005 sexualityandu.ca e-newsletter, <http://www.sexualityandu.ca>.
Original Source: Grimley DM, Annang L, Houser S, Chen H. Prevalence of condom use errors among STD clinic patients. Am J Health Behav. 2005 Jul-Aug;29(4):324-30.

Blueprint for Action on Women and HIV/AIDS

The Blueprint for Action on Women and HIV/AIDS is a comprehensive strategy to stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic among women (including transgendered women) globally. Initiated by five Canadians in the HIV field, it now has an international membership and endorsement from 70 groups. PWN Executive Director Marcie Summers was one of the founding members.

On World AIDS Day, December 1, the Blueprint manifesto was released across the country. Some key demands for change are listed here. To view the full document, go to: www.pwn.bc.ca/pdf/Blueprint_Manifesto_Dec_05.pdf

Legal, Ethical and Human Rights

In many countries, women have few, if any, legal rights and, even in countries where we do, our rights are trampled on daily. In Canada, historical events and colonization have led to systemic racism and to the violation of human rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (First Nations, Métis and Inuit). This has had a severe impact on susceptibility to HIV, particularly for women.

We demand:

Leadership and immediate action from all levels of government in Canada to redress the impacts of colonization and racism that are fueling the HIV epidemic for Aboriginal people in Canada.

Leadership and immediate action from all levels of government globally, to create, implement and strongly enforce laws that prohibit human rights violations against women.

Research

Women of all cultural backgrounds and life experiences are effectively absent from the HIV/AIDS research agenda and research decision-making at all levels.

We demand:

A comprehensive research on HIV/AIDS that specifically answers questions of importance to the health of women.

Development of women-initiated forms of HIV/AIDS prevention, particularly microbicides.

Stigma and Discrimination

Women with HIV/AIDS face profound stigma and discrimination in all aspects of their lives. Stigma and discrimination is compounded by factors including racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and poverty. These forms of stigma and discrimination fuel epidemics globally.

We demand:

Implementation by governments globally of public education and awareness campaigns to end stigma and discrimination against women with HIV/AIDS.

Women lack access to testing, are denied testing, are under-diagnosed and are diagnosed too late for successful treatment interventions.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Women lack access to testing, are denied testing, are under-diagnosed and are diagnosed too late for successful treatment interventions.

We demand:

Compulsory education of all health care providers about women and HIV/AIDS as part of their professional training.

Care and Support

Women with HIV/AIDS face multiple demanding family roles that erode their health and limit the time and attention they can spend on necessary self care.

We demand:

Develop responsive models for health care and support delivery that acknowledge and affirm the multiple roles that women play.

Overarching Demand

We demand:

All demands must have adequate and sustained resources.

For more information on the *Blueprint for Action on Women and HIV/AIDS*, contact Marcie Summers, PWN's Executive Director at 604.692.3010.

Some National Blueprint partners

- Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN)
- Canadian AIDS Society (CAS)
- Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE)
- Canadian Treatment Action Council (CTAC)
- Canadian Federation for Sexual Health (CFSH)
- Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network
- Canadian HIV/AIDS Information Centre, Canadian Public Health Association
- Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation
- ICAD
- Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association

- Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada (Canadian Federation for Sexual Health)
- Positive Women's Network (PWN)
- Voices of Positive Women (VOPW)

Some International Blueprint Partners

- ATHENA: Advancing Gender Equity and Human Rights in the Global Response to HIV/AIDS
- Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GNP+)
- Taking It Global
- International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW)

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Support Program News

by Bronwyn

Here are the latest items from the Support Department. First of all, a big welcome to Melissa M. who is our new Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) student! Melissa will be working with the PWN Support Team until April 2006.

Member Retreats

Mark your calendars— we've set the dates. This year's Vancouver Island retreat will be February 24, 25, 26th at Cowichan Lake. Or later in the spring, join us on Bowen Island May 13, 14, 15th. Please contact Tamara H., Retreat Coordinator at 604.692.3000, toll free 1.866.692.3001 or email retreat_2006@yahoo.ca

PWN Stepping Out

A few changes are happening in the PWN Support Team. Because many women do not connect with us here at our Vancouver office, we are shifting some of our drop-in support to outreach support. Stacie Migwans, one of our Support Workers, will be available to do outreach visits to HIV+ women living in the Lower Mainland who are not able to access PWN directly. Home visits will be arranged by Stacie, and may include an intake, information on PWN, referrals, general support for HIV+ women, and more. Women may self-refer, or referrals from other organizations are welcome. Please contact Stacie at 604-692-3005 for further information.

It's Retreat Time: Join Us

Friday, February 24th to
Sunday, February 26th, 2006
Cowichan Lake on Vancouver Island

Who can apply?

This retreat is open to all members of the Positive Women's Network but priority will be given to PWN members living on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands.

Where is the retreat?

The Cowichan Lake Outdoor Education and Conference Center on Vancouver Island (check out the website at <http://town.lakecowichan.bc.ca/clec/>)

How much does it cost?

It's FREE to PWN members! The Positive Women's Network covers ALL retreat and transportation costs.

How do I apply for the retreat?

If you haven't received an application, contact us as soon as possible.

**Application deadline is
Friday January 13th, 2006**

For more information or to receive registration forms please contact: Tamara or Bronwyn

- Lower mainland: 604-692-3000
- Toll-free: 1-866-692-3001
- Email: retreat_2006@yahoo.ca

Set this afternoon aside!

Positive Women's Network is proud to present

SpringBoard 2006



a conference event for positive women and their allies

Wednesday March 8, 2006

3:30 PM - 8:00 PM

Listel Hotel, Vancouver

Join positive women and service providers as we share what we need and how we can work together.

- 3:30- 4:00 Networking and refreshments
- 4:00- 5:30 Concurrent roundtable sessions
- 5:30- 6:00 Prize draws
- 6:00 Buffet dinner
- 6:30 Keynote speaker Dr. Sharon Walmsley

More details will be mailed out and posted on our website as they become available.

For ongoing updates, visit our website (www.pwn.bc.ca) or contact pwn@pwn.bc.ca.



Abbott Laboratories Ltd. is the exclusive pharmaceutical sponsor of this event.

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Events and Program Information

Quick Calendar: go to www.pwn.bc.ca for updates

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30	Drop-in closed
	Lunch 12-2	(Closed on Cheque Issue Wednesdays)	Lunch : 12-2	
	Foodbank 12-2. No pick-up any other day.		Support Group, 5:30PM. See details below.	
Administration 9:00-4:00 Monday through Friday				

NEW Drop In hours

The drop in is now open Monday to Thursday from 11:30 to 3:30. The drop-in will be closed Friday so we can do new outreach activities (see Support Program News on page 8).

Talk to your Doc

On Thursday January 19 we'll host a discussion group on how to talk to your doctor. Do you get nervous when you see your doctor? Do you forget things you want to ask? Do you want to know how other women deal with this? Come with your stories and leave with ideas. January 19 at 12 noon in the drop-in.

Beat the January blues and celebrate with lunch

We will host our second *Beat the January Blues* lunch on January 24th, 2006. Relax, visit and eat great food at Balthazar's Restaurant. Event starts at 12 noon. You must RSVP to the main phone line of PWN (604.692.3000) by January 17th.

Mind & Body Connection Support Group

Our support group is starting again. The aim of the group is to look at how to lower stress through the mind and body connection. The group will meet Thursdays at 5:30, starting January 5th. Other dates are January 12th, 19th, February 2nd, 9th and 16th. To confirm, call Sangam at 604.692.3006.

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Events and Program Information

Pass it on... about PWN

We have a new handbill explaining who we are and what we do. We want to make more communities aware of our services so that women are not so isolated. We've connected with about 1500 destinations including doctors, medical clinics, and aboriginal groups. Do you know a place we shouldn't miss? Please let us know. Call toll-free (1.866.692.3001) or e-mail: pwn@pwn.bc.ca

Survey Prize Winner

Thanks to all who filled out our survey. The winning number for the prize is 230420. Please mail it in or drop by to claim your prize by January 15. Thanks!

Newsletter by e-mail

We are trying to cut down on the costs of mailing, so if you would like to receive the newsletter by e-mail, please let us know at pwn@pwn.bc.ca or call 604.692.3000 (BC toll-free number for outside the Lower Mainland: 1.866.692.3001).

Foodbank

The foodbank is closed the Tuesday before cheque issue. Days the foodbank will be close in the next few months: January 24, February 21, and March 28.

Post approval surveillance workshop

We are also hoping to provide a workshop on the post approval surveillance study in February. We couldn't confirm by this newsletter, so check out the website or the drop-in for an update.

Support in pajamas? You bet.

It's 2 in the morning and you are not sleeping. You really want to get something off your chest. Where are you going to go? The *HIV Discussion Forum for Women* on WAVE, of course.

PWN's on-line support and education program, WAVE (Women and AIDS Virtual Education, www.pwn-wave.ca) has a bulletin board where you can anonymously post your questions, issues, worries... This is a way you can get support if you are not ready or able to reach out in person. You can also offer support by responding to posts yourself. Topics on the board right now include:

- Just found out I'm positive...
- How do women juggle family demands?
- Connecting with poz hetero men?
- Changes due to treatments

The WAVE site includes information on how to get out of the site quickly and cover your internet tracks to protect your confidentiality. Go here for more: www.pwn-wave.ca/index.cfm?group_ID=1005 And check out the bulletin board: www.pwn-wave.ca/index.cfm?group_id=1015.



Do you have something to share with other members?

Deadline for submissions to the next newsletter is March 8.

Send submissions to janetm@pwn.bc.ca or by mail (see last page).

Connect with Us

in person or by mail

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Vancouver, BC V6E 1M7

by phone

604.692.3000 (local)
1.866.692.3001 (toll-free in BC only)

by fax

604.684.3126

by email

pwn@pwn.bc.ca

online

meet us: www.pwn.bc.ca

find support: www.pwn-wave.ca

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Positive Women's Network, a partnership of women led by women living with and affected by HIV, supports women living with HIV/AIDS in making informed choices. We provide safe access to support, advocacy, and education/prevention for women in communities throughout British Columbia. The Positive Women's Network provides leadership around HIV in the health care community in BC and Canada.

Thanks to our supporters!



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Funding for the Pocket Guide provided through
an unrestricted grant from Boehringer
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Unless otherwise noted, all materials in this newsletter are written by
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