

## It helps when you know you're not alone

A Soweto father's disclosure of his HIV status to his employer and family helped him to cope

By Philippa Garson

Abel is waiting for his HIV test result when I first meet him at a support group for HIV-positive men at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto. He sits calmly in a group of about 20 men, an open-faced, athletic man in his mid-30s, listening intently to what is being said by two young facilitators.

Only a repetitively swinging foot hints at the storm that must be raging inside him. Suddenly he speaks up: "I went to have an HIV test today. I'm worried about the results." He pauses.

"My wife is HIV-positive. She found out while she was pregnant with our child. When she told me about her status I became angry and violent. I didn't understand. I've been avoiding getting the test for some time but now I'm ready for it."

After this dramatic synopsis, Abel falls silent. Dressed simply but stylishly in jeans, a t-shirt and sandals, he is a good-looking man. He also possesses that combination of humility and dignity that inspires the respect of others.

Abel works in a food factory in Industria, south of Johannesburg, where he is a shop steward. He lives with his wife, Agnes, and baby daughter Elizabeth in a prim little house in Protea Glen, Soweto.

The following Wednesday, Abel is back. This time he is agitated and excited. He can hardly wait to get the discussion going. "Last week when I tested I found out I was positive.

I took my results and told my manager. I told him there are support groups to go to. He said I can go to a support group and come to work afterwards." Abel pauses for breath. He sounds euphoric. "A position came up in the company. He told me to apply and I got the job."

Electricity courses through the group. Abel is saluted as a "hero" for "coming out to his company".

Later, I ask Abel what it felt like to get his test result. "You know I took a long time to get tested," he says. "Whenever my wife asked me to go I always had excuses. I told her I didn't have time. I was playing hide-and-seek with my status ...

"When I saw the person who was giving my results, I saw from her face, her face changed. She was sad. I just told myself, ha! It's positive. She said, 'Abel this is not the end of the world'."

Abel, 34, is now a regular at Wednesday support group. "I'm very enthusiastic, my wife can tell you.

I wake up early to come here.

I thought I was the only one with problems but there are others with more problems than me."

Each week I see Abel grow in purpose and stature. He plays an increasingly visible role, urging others to be supportive to their partners, to tell their bosses about their status and not to squander their money on cures for "bewitchment".

Abel says his factory lost nine workers to Aids last year.

"There are many at work who are sick. They say they are bewitched and deny they are HIV-positive. Others say it's flu. We buried someone last week. Now my boss has asked me, as a shop steward, if it's okay to talk about my status. I said it's not a problem because this thing is here."

Abel is steadily taking on the mantle of activist. He reminds me of one of those surefooted "struggle" heroes of a bygone era - steadfast, determined and very brave. But this is now and Abel has a very different kind of struggle on his hands.

At the next support group meeting, he looks downcast. Has the euphoria of his promotion and of his newfound mission in life dissipated so soon? The conversation of the day is about disclosing one's status.

"Disclosure has its advantages and disadvantages," he tells the group. "For me, I thought it was an advantage to disclose. I told my family and other friends. When they visited last Sunday, my wife cooked and no one wanted to eat the food because they thought it was infected with HIV. We had to throw it away."

But this is just one of the new challenges in Abel's life. When relatives spread the news of their status, he and his wife phoned an Aids helpline. Advised to take the matter to the police, who then told them to go to court, Abel and Agnes opted instead for a family meeting.

"My wife says, as Christians, let's forgive." The rift has now been healed, but what really gives

Abel strength is his relationship with Agnes. "As long as we love each other, we don't care about the rumours."

When I first meet Agnes, she and Abel are walking on air. Abel waves a piece of paper, laughing. "It's negative!" he shouts. The crumpled paper is the HIV test result of his little girl - the gift of a lifetime. Baby Elizabeth looks wide-eyed at the excitement. We celebrate her health over toasted sandwiches.

When Agnes was four months pregnant she found out she was HIV-positive. "I didn't believe I was positive because I know my husband is a good person. He is faithful to me.

I was in a hurry to tell him... What encouraged me is that I was not alone. Out of 10 that day, seven of us were positive."

Agnes says she tries not to get stressed and listens to Abel when he says: "Don't be worried, woman. It's a new life now."

And the fact that they are both still healthy and that Elizabeth is HIV-negative is reason enough to throw a party. "If we can get the money, we'll invite friends. We're not drinking actually, but we'll get a case [of beer] for them. We won't tell them why we're celebrating. That's between my wife and me.

"We are very happy because she was our last hope," continues Abel. "We will make sure that we will give her education. I will join an education insurance plan. Our counsellors say we can live longer if we follow the instructions of this disease - no smoking, drinking, or having unprotected sex."

And what about more children? "No!" they chorus. "It's a risk," says Agnes, a shy 26-year-old who prefers to let her husband do the talking.

"Maybe we can adopt a boy in future. My intention was always to have a boy," Abel says. But Abel's more pressing plans are to spread the news of his status at work. "My plan is to tell them about this virus. I will tell them to go and get tested. I will tell them - me, I am HIV-positive and I will come there with you."

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