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WHEN  
**OPPOSITES**  
ATTRACT



# WHEN OPPOSITES ATTRACT

**1 in 7** men on London's gay scene have HIV, which means the vast majority of us have had sex with many, many HIV+ men in our lifetimes. But what happens when one man has HIV, the other is negative, and that casual encounter becomes a boyfriend, which then turns into a full-blown relationship - and even love? Aaron Garcia de Alba presents a personal account of his experiences as a HIV positive gay man, and meets Mike, also positive, and his negative partner Marc and talks life, love and sex in a serodiscordant relationship...

Photo: Marta Colli

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ast week the gay community in England and Wales conquered one of its major stepping stones in the struggle to have homosexual partnerships be fully recognised as equal to those unions of marriage by civil law. This is perhaps the best news we could have had in time for St. Valentine's Day.

However, we may not all be rushing to the registrar just yet. After all, one still needs to find Mr Right, and we all know that's no easy task in itself. From finding someone mentally and physically attractive, there's also the issue of sexual compatibility: top, bottom, versatile... and every fifty[thousand] shades of grey in between. But what if the person you fall in love with has an HIV status different to yours?

That's right. Could you love someone who is HIV positive? And if you are HIV positive, would you let yourself fall in love with someone who is HIV negative and risk the possibility of rejection?

My fellow gays, this is our next hurdle to overcome. Stigma and discrimination surrounds people living with HIV. And this

fight cannot be resolved by laws and votes, this fight needs to be conquered by all of us, with courage and education.

It has been 8½ years since I was told that I was HIV positive. It was the summer of 2004 in Spain, Barcelona, at a medical centre in the Raval quarter. This is where African prostitutes and heroin addicts would get tended to, but I was neither of these stereotypes. I was a recently heart broken, in his early-twenties, promiscuous gay male. The other stereotype they tended.

When I was told so candidly by the doctor that I was HIV positive the only thing that came to my mind were the stories and images from the 80s and 90s of people dying from AIDS. The drama queen inside me (yes, we all have one) came out, so I quickly asked the doctor how long I had to live. He responded that with medication about 10 to 20 years. I didn't believe him, I thought I had less.

Looking back at it; my ignorance and fear dramatised my HIV diagnosis. I didn't speak to anyone about it for the next six months. (Big

mistake, don't do this! Talk about it.)

Secretly I expected the worst. Yet strangely as this may sound, I even romanticised the whole idea of being HIV positive. *Voluptas Dolendi* perhaps?

It's 2013 and the truth has been very different, both the doctor and I have been proven wrong.

I take one pill a day, nothing romantic about that, but I am fit and sexy as a fiddle.

Today people who are diagnosed early on and who take their medication can live to old age without any major changes to their lives and hardly any side effects at all, thanks to the sheer amount of continuous research and development of new drugs by scientists. Hooray, for doctors, scientists, and all the people who supported them.

Now, OK, I've said hardly *any* side effects mainly because there is one huge side effect: life.

HIV positive people are living healthier and more normal lives than ever before, some might even argue that we now could have the same life expectancy as that of HIV negative people.

Living with HIV has become part of our







Mike

“A very common misconception of recently diagnosed people with HIV is that they will never be loved again. And yes, I also thought this.”

“It’s ridiculous that so many of the younger set don’t practice safe sex... The fact that HIV can be managed relatively easily is wonderful, but it’s not an excuse to play in traffic.”

contemporary lives. Until a cure is found, HIV is here to stay whether we like it or not.

As people living with HIV we will need to learn to deal with a number of issues: 1) The most important of all is to stop feeling guilty and ashamed, for we were the unlucky ones who got infected doing something which everybody does, everyday, all over the planet. Get over it. 2) To handle our diagnosis and take our medication. 3) Learn to be brave and disclose it to other people. 4) To fight the ignorance and social stigma which often haunts living with HIV.

If you are HIV negative you might be thinking: “Thank God I don’t need to worry about that” because you may be very careful to always have sex with a condom – so it’s fine!

Which is absolutely correct. Wearing a condom is the best way to protect you from

getting infected. However, the reality is that the day will come when you meet the guy of your dreams, you’ve played your cards well and started dating. Soon you realise that you both have so much in common: you love his kisses; he laughs at your jokes; you think he is so fun and fit; and soon you begin to daydream of your future holidays together on the hot beaches of Sitges; the music repertoire for your wedding; all the friends and family you will invite just so they can see your fit husband to be. [I’ve never done this, ever!]

All is perfect. You have fallen in love. But then he tells you he’s HIV positive.

What would you do?

A newly diagnosed HIV positive person may go through many fears in the first few weeks,

mainly due to lack of information about HIV. Emotions run high; feelings of regret and guilt are haunting. After an initial rollercoaster, acceptance sets in and most fears will dissipate, except one. The fear of rejection.

As humans we like to belong to society and live in loving relationships, hence a very common misconception of recently diagnosed

people with HIV is that they will never be loved again. And yes, I also thought this.

It’s Valentine’s Day, the day of friendship, love and why not sex? What a perfect excuse to talk about love and sex in the times of HIV.

### LET’S TALK ABOUT SEX!

Let’s cut to the chase. We come from sex, we enjoy having sex and we are gay not because of the dressing up, the mincing, the lisp or the frivolous partying. We are gay because we enjoy having sex with people of our same gender. And unprotected intercourse is the main route to how HIV is transmitted.

There is a reason that THT and other gay sexual health agencies are continually appealing to the gay community to get tested, and that is because knowing your status can save your life. Having HIV is not solely about being infected with a virus, it’s about identifying your viral load, which differs for every single person who has it. If you have a high viral load, you need medication – medication helps bring your viral load down, to undetectable levels, so it doesn’t impact your immune system, and makes you less likely to pass on HIV to a negative person (although, of course, transmission is still possible which is why condoms are still so important).

I’ll admit that sex without a condom feels more intimate, but this is also how most people - and myself - contract HIV.

I’ve had two steady boyfriends since my diagnosis who were and still are negative (yes, I’m currently single FYI). Sex with them was great. I told the first one that I was HIV positive after a few dates; he was perfectly cool with it. He didn’t like to wear condoms and to be honest neither did I. We agreed that if he would top me, we would do it raw, but if I would top him we would do it safe. This was our safe(ish) trade-off since I was taking my medication, and my HIV viral load was considered undetectable in my system, however, yes there were still risks, but we were both aware of them. We had a great sexual relationship, and we broke up for other reasons. We’re still friends and he’s still negative.

However, with the other boyfriend we decided to keep it safe both ways, from the beginning, and we also had a great sex life. We later drifted apart because we had different goals in life. Our break-up was nothing to do with HIV, we’re still very good friends and he’s still negative.

The fact remains, in both cases I knew my status and was also on medication.



## When an HIV positive man and an HIV negative man fall in love

Marc and Mike (yes, these are their real names) faced this dilemma and have bravely shared their stories with us. Mike has been HIV positive for 11 years and Marc is HIV negative. Mike met Marc online three years ago whilst Mike was on holiday in the USA. After nine months of dating they married in Massachusetts and

now Marc lives happily with Mike in London. The perfect happy story of an HIV positive and an HIV negative couple conquering their fears to share a common life together.

### **Aaron: Now, how do you guys do it?**

Mike: Much the same as you do, to be honest. Marc's generally driving, and he prefers not to use condoms. He's very aware of the potential risk, but he has a clear idea of what he will and won't do. Plus, we're monogamous. I'm on a successful treatment, and we're not into the kind of stuff where blood would normally be an issue. If I'm on top, then we always play it safe and use condoms. We're actually enrolled in the PARTNER sexual health study, which is monitoring a large number of serodiscordant couples across Europe to find out why some people seem not to become infected by their positive partners.

### **Mike, when did you tell your partner and what were your fears?**

Mike: We met online when I was on holiday in America. Marc offered to show me around Fort Lauderdale, so I actually think I told him before our coffee date. As strange as it now sounds, neither of us really thought it was going to become a sex thing or go anywhere else! Prior to meeting Marc I'd had some bad experiences with disclosing to people. I learned to develop a thick skin, but that doesn't mean rejection didn't still sting sometimes. By the point I met Marc, though, I'd pretty much decided that anyone who couldn't accept my HIV status wasn't worth the trouble. Discovering their prejudice earlier just meant a lot of saved time in the long run.

### **Marc, how did you react to it and what were your fears?**

Marc: I was unfazed by Mike's disclosure. I had been in several serious relationships with HIV positive partners in the past, so I had done my research and didn't see Mike's status as something to be feared. I have never seen HIV status as a reason to avoid intimacy with someone. I was a volunteer on the hotline at the Fenway Community Health Center in Boston, Massachusetts during the height of the AIDS epidemic. Back then, no one even knew how HIV was spread, but I had access to the most accurate information at the time. I made my mind up back then to partake in only specific sexual behaviours, and to never stray from them - not in the name of love, or alcohol or anything. I think that decision has helped to keep me HIV negative, so I never really built up any fears around the subject. I accept that being in a relationship with Mike and playing the way we play has some inherent risks, but I don't live in fear of those risks. At forty six years old, I'm more worried about heart disease

getting me, than AIDS, but I accept that if I did sero-convert, I would manage to live a long and healthy life in spite of it.

That said, I think it's ridiculous that so many of the younger set don't practice safe sex. These kids have never known anyone who has actually died from AIDS, and believe me, if they had, they wouldn't be messing about with their lives. If you get the virus and you have access to great healthcare everything should work out OK, but what happens if you end up living somewhere that doesn't have an NHS? What happens if the government changes the rules and you have to start paying for a portion of your meds, or worse still, determines for you what meds you can have? What happens if you develop a tolerance to the meds? The fact that HIV can be managed relatively easily is wonderful, but it's not an excuse to play in traffic.

**My flatmate is also gay and he doesn't know I'm HIV positive. Recently I told him that I was writing this article on couples with different HIV statuses, and he immediately offered his opinion, that he could never date someone who is HIV positive. Unfortunately, many people still think like this. What do you have to say to people who think as such?**

Mike: If you're worried about dating someone who's HIV positive because of the chance of you becoming positive, then you really need to think about a few things. For example, your potential partner may not know, may not disclose their status, or may just plain lie about it. People cheat, too, so your "dream guy", who's HIV negative when you meet him, may not stay that way, and you may not find out until a lot later. On the other hand, if the idea of dating someone who's got a potentially life-threatening disease is the problem, then really you're just running from life. There are a lot of things that can kill you, including buses and cancer. A friend of mine died from bowel cancer. It was ferocious, and he was gone in months. I'm sure, given the choice between the two, he'd taken HIV and the chance to live a long and otherwise healthy life. Why would anyone deny themselves the chance of a shot at love and happiness with someone, just because they had HIV? There are so many worse things life can throw at you.

### **Are you scared of contracting HIV?**

Marc: In my opinion, people who use fear as an excuse to avoid intimacy with someone, regardless of their status, are uptight, narrow-minded jerks and you can almost guarantee they would be lousy partners and too uptight in bed to be good sex.



There's a Native American proverb that says: "Tell me and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I'll understand."

Being HIV positive has become a manageable disease, which no longer threatens lives as long as its detected and treated early on.

If you are HIV negative and meet someone who is HIV positive be open minded, get informed, ask questions. Don't be shy, you'll learn many things about HIV, life and that person.

If you are HIV positive make sure you are taking your medication. And don't be afraid of letting people know the truth. Increasingly, people are becoming more accepting and open minded then what you might think. And if you do encounter rejection take it with a pinch of salt, we've all been there, and like Mike said at least you've realised it early on, instead of wasting time with that person. Plus, it'll make you stronger.

And if you don't know your status, get tested! Don't be afraid! If you do test positive you won't die of AIDS, and it won't be the end of your life. The earlier you get treated the better for you and for everyone else.

And on a final note for all, let's all learn to let go of our inner drama queens and be brave to accept and to deal with HIV. To quote the legendary Bob Marley: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds."

## HAVE YOUR SAY!

QX would love to hear from other gay men in serodiscordant relationships - or those who would like to contribute to the debate. Please email your thoughts to: [letters@qxmagazine.com](mailto:letters@qxmagazine.com) or online at [qxmagazine.com/feature/when-opposites-attract](http://qxmagazine.com/feature/when-opposites-attract) or at the following blog: [woaqx.tumblr.com](http://woaqx.tumblr.com)

