

HIV/AIDS and Stigma

Which one is the killer?

STIGMA: the phenomenon whereby an individual with an attribute, which is deeply discredited by his/her society, is rejected as a result of the attribute

HIV/AIDS Stigma: AIDS stigma exists around the world in a variety of ways, including ostracism, rejection, discrimination and avoidance of HIV infected people; compulsory HIV testing, violence against HIV infected individuals or people who are perceived to be infected with HIV; and the quarantine of HIV infected individuals. Stigma-related violence or the fear of violence prevents many people from seeking HIV testing, returning for their results, or securing treatment, possibly turning what could be a manageable chronic illness into a death sentence and perpetuating the spread of HIV

Imagine just being diagnosed with an illness and returning to work or home after your appointment to share your diagnosis with others. If you return being diagnosed with cancer most will likely gather round to express their sympathy and understanding. But try returning after being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and the reaction is likely to be much different. Of course some of us are fortunate enough to be surrounded with friends, family and co-workers who are educated about this disease and would be more understanding and accepting of others with the diagnosis. For a great majority, I am sad to say, it is still a major issue they must face every day in living with HIV.

Many associate HIV/AIDS with moral and religious issues assuming that it was ones own personal sexual or ethical demise that caused them to be infected. Substance abuse plays a large part in contracting the disease by either sharing of needles or having unprotected sex due to the lowering of one's inhibitions while intoxicated or high from the drug of choice. Substance abuse and addiction alone are misunderstood and stigmatized in our society so it is no surprise that HIV and or the combination of the two can place one in a position to be the recipient of discrimination, stigma, rejection and hate crimes.

I remember my first encounter with HIV and stigma when I decided to become a volunteer at an AIDS project in 1992. I was so excited about my decision to learn more about the disease and to help those who were infected and affected by it. As I started sharing my new experience with co-workers and friends I was amazed at how many first responded with "Aren't you afraid you will catch it?" or "You don't have to touch them do you?" I might also add today 17 years later and working as a case manager at WNCAP I still encounter people who respond in this way. I believe that neither time nor education is able to change the views and opinions of many. Fear is a great holder of poisoning and deadly ideas and actions. It leaves no room for growth or love or healing within oneself or their community. It is a barrier once overcome that can bring great freedom to ourselves and those we come in contact with. It can open minds and hearts and help to rid the small part of the world we can reach of stigma and discrimination and misunderstanding. Won't you join us and be a part of this campaign to end stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS.

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