

Interviewing Marlies Geurts



"I felt the freedom of my life disappeared..." says 25 year-old Marlies from the Netherlands when she found out she was HIV positive. She felt shattered not only because of her status, but because of the fear that she might not be able to conceive a child.

How I got infected – I found out that I was HIV positive three and a half years ago. I got the infection from my ex-boyfriend who I had been in a monogamous relationship for over two years. I became very ill a while after breaking up with him. I had some gynaecological problems and to be sure they tested me on sexual transmitted infections, including HIV. I found out that I was positive at the hospital. I called up my ex-boyfriend and he just told me that he now must be tested too. He did not seem shocked. He died of AIDS six months later. I then found out that he already knew he had HIV/AIDS for seven years.

How I felt about my diagnosis – The first question I asked my doctor was if I could still have children. I was already aware and that I don't have to die of HIV/AIDS. After knowing more about AIDS and treatment, I started feeling scared. I suddenly had many responsibilities in the treatment. From then on, I realized that I could no longer have the same lifestyle. I had to live seriously: when going out, with sex, with taking treatment.

Personal Reaction and Reaction from Family and Friends – My family still does not know I have HIV/AIDS. I am convinced that they will not understand it and will constantly be scared that I will die soon because of the stigma attached to the disease. Even if I could explain everything, I do not think they will change their view on HIV/AIDS. They are quite old.

Living Positively – Take your therapy seriously! It is important that you take your medications. I save my energy for the good things in life. I choose friends who understand me and my HIV status. I had always wanted children and knew that my status will not come in the way of my dreams. I now have two beautiful children. Even though I have HIV, I try to see things positively. I decided to be more active, give education about HIV to other young people and support and mentor others like me who have HIV. I am on antiretroviral (ARV) drugs and even though I have certain side-effects like chronically tiredness and loss of concentration, it has been a positive treatment overall.

Life and Aspirations – Once you are positive, you have to really think before you act. When I was younger and before I got HIV, I could have the freedom to enjoy life in a more simple way, without this responsibility for others and my own health. For instance, having a new relationship is not that easy anymore. You now have to tell that you are HIV positive and hope that the other person understands this. I cannot be out late at night because I will feel tired afterwards. My greatest dream is that that everybody will have access to free medication and to be treated for HIV/AIDS so they can live positively and have a positive life. I also hope that the stigma and discrimination toward HIV/AIDS will go away and that having HIV is just like having any other disease. Breaking the taboo on HIV/AIDS will stop the spread of the disease. Had he spoken to me about his status, I would not have HIV now. When my ex-boyfriend died, I told his mother that I had contacted HIV from her son, and she suddenly acted scared. She did not want much contact with me and she told everybody that her son died in a car accident. The taboo is huge.

Facing Stigma – I have had a couple of discriminatory incidences because of my status. A friend of mine once wanted to borrow lipstick but was afraid to use it. Although I had explained to her about transmission, she still felt scared. When I was at the hospital when I found out that I was pregnant, a nurse referred me to an abortion clinic. She just assumed that I could not have a child because of my HIV status. Once when I had an operation, they wanted me to have a private room even though I did not want one. I think they felt scared to wash me. On the bed sheets, they placed a red sticker to identify that my sheets were from an HIV infected person. At my son's childcare, the manager and childcare providers had several questions on how they could be protected from HIV. They thought that because I am HIV positive, my son also had it. They didn't care much about the health of my son, but for their own health.

Advice for Other Young People – To disclose a person's HIV status is their own decision. However, when an infected person is in a relationship where he/she is having sex, they have to take responsibility to discuss it, not only for themselves but for the sake of the other person as well.