

# BE A POSITIVE FORCE

When someone learns a loved one is HIV positive, they don't always react positively with concern, care and support. Story after story from people living with HIV tell the tale of being ostracized or deserted by family and friends, called hateful and hurtful names, and accused with negative assumptions of risky behavior.



The power of one positive force, one extended hand offering support, and one kind word has the ability to help change the trajectory of a person's life with HIV.

Not knowing what to say is normal, so it's important to go slow and be thoughtful about what you do say.

**The following scenarios really happened – imagine they happened to you and learn how you can be a positive force in the life of a person living with HIV.**





## **You see your friend John has posted several negative comments on social media about people living with HIV.**

Comments like “people who don't want it, take precautions, and don't get it,” ending with the hurtful statement “I don't want it near me.” Your mutual friend Kay is HIV positive and she and John are close. Everyone in your friend group is texting back and forth and have shared the news with Kay – you know she must be devastated.

### **What can you do?**

As a friend to both John and Kay you have two opportunities. The first is to connect with Kay and ask her if she is OK. You should assure her that you don't feel the same way and neither do your other friends and acknowledge how hurtful it must be to her. Plan a lunch or other get-together so she feels your support and be sure to include her in upcoming social events, so she doesn't feel further isolated.

You should also connect with John and ask him questions that help you understand what triggered those comments from him. Let him know that discrimination against people living with HIV is a form of stigma and can have a huge impact on their feelings of self-worth. Share your knowledge of the facts about HIV and transmission or connect him with other resources. Remind him what a great friend you both have in Kay.





## **At a get-together, you and your sister Roseline learn from your gay younger brother Julio that he is HIV positive.**

You have always been supportive of Julio, even when learning he was gay. Roseline is more conservative and had struggled with Julio's sexual orientation but has become more accepting over time. However, upon hearing his HIV status, Roseline was furious. She called Julio derogatory names, told him he was dirty, that he would never be the same, and she did not want him to come to her house and expose her children.

### **What can you do?**

Your first response should be to model positive behavior. Give Julio a hug to show your closeness and support and to show others that HIV is not transmitted by touch. Ask him how he is doing with this news. Make sure he knows that he has your continued support and that you will help him every step of the way. Tell him you would like to go with him to the doctor to learn more and that the first step for both of you is to get educated about HIV.

Once you have all the facts, reach out to your sister and tell her what you've learned about HIV and how it's transmitted. Assure her that your brother hasn't changed and needs the support of his family to live a healthy life. Be patient, it may take several conversations for your sister to reconsider and open her mind. Suggest she talk to her own doctor or seek out other references for reassurance.

Continue to be a role model by demonstrating ongoing support and love for your brother.





## You are part of a community board focused on HIV support in your city.

One of the newest members of the board, Roma, is very well-educated and an important influencer and advocate for people living with HIV. She is HIV positive herself, and her status is well-known to board members. You notice over the course of several board meetings that when discussing key strategic initiatives other members only ask Roma's input as a person living with HIV, she is never asked her opinion in any other capacity. It is uncomfortable to you that your colleagues only see Roma's HIV status and not a person with other valuable insights to share.

### What can you do?

While it's possible that the other board members aren't aware of what they are doing and are just excited to have Roma's firsthand experience, it is a form of discrimination. It is demoralizing to only be seen and treated as a person living with HIV – with no other value to offer. You should model positive behavior and start asking Roma's opinion on other vital elements at upcoming board meetings, giving her a platform to showcase her areas of expertise. If your colleagues' behavior doesn't change as a result, you should approach them and let them know that you think Roma may feel excluded and that her HIV status is all she is recognized for by the group. Inform them that this is a form of stigma and discrimination and that it could impact Roma's feelings of self-worth. Offer up some resources, so they can learn more about stigma and discrimination and how to avoid it.





## **You and couple of girlfriends are at your friend Sara's house. Sara is HIV positive and has disclosed her status to all her friends.**

You notice that one friend in your group, Donna, is looking around like she doesn't want to sit down or touch anything and has a grimace on her face. Sara hasn't noticed this yet as she is in and out getting drinks and food out on the table.

### **What can you do?**

You should first model positive behavior. Greet Sara with a hug and then invite Donna to come sit beside you on the couch. Take one of the drinks from the table and drink it. Then grab an appetizer. Offer one to Donna and others. Find a chance to speak to Donna alone and tell her that she may not know, but HIV isn't transmitted by sharing food or drink. Nor is it transmitted through hugging, shaking hands, or socially kissing someone who has HIV. HIV can't survive outside the body and isn't spread through the air or on objects like glasses or toilet seats. Offer to chat with her further and give her more information. Follow up by sending her some links to basic information about HIV.





## **You notice your friend Hal is not himself. He has avoided your calls and refused recent invitations to get together with you and other friends.**

He seems very down and depressed. Hal is HIV positive and you know that he has periods when he struggles with self-blame and feelings of shame, and you worry that this is one of those times.

### **What can you do?**

Be persistent and let Hal know how much you care about him and value his friendship. Mention that he seems down and offer to help him find someone to talk to or go with him to seek help at an AIDS Service Organization or other healthcare provider. Self-stigma affects many people living with HIV and can impact their feelings of self-worth and their health. Good social support can help boost self-esteem and overall health.

\*The names have been changed and some liberties have been taken in describing the scenarios.