

Becoming serodiscordant: How do gay couples manage a new HIV diagnosis?

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Background: Little research has explored the differences in issues faced by gay couples who have an established relationship and become serodiscordant after an HIV diagnosis compared with those who enter their relationships already serodiscordant. We explored how couples managed a new HIV diagnosis, and how they negotiated new identities as a couple living with HIV.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2014 with 111 recently diagnosed Australian HIV-positive men recruited as part of the Seroconversion Study. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data.

Findings: We included 41 participants into our analysis: 25 who were in a serodiscordant relationship, 6 single men who discussed relationships that ended once they were diagnosed, and 10 who discussed previous relationships in which they were HIV-negative and their partner contracted HIV. Although a few relationships ended due to their diagnosis, most participants thought that maintaining relationships was more important than any threat HIV posed, and some felt the diagnosis actually strengthened their relationship. Stories of love, support, moving on, and solidarity were frequently cited in the face of HIV. However, participants nonetheless faced multiple challenges in renegotiating their sexual agreements, in particular returning to sex with condoms. Participants also discussed how they felt burdened by feelings of infectiousness, responsibility, powerlessness, and fear of transmission, as well as their concerns about disclosing their diagnosis, particularly if it occurred through 'cheating.'

Conclusion: New HIV diagnoses within relationships require that couples renegotiate their sexual agreements. This can present unique relational challenges. However, apart from knowing they can utilise condoms, there is little publicly available information that assists newly serodiscordant couples negotiate HIV-prevention strategies as they tread unfamiliar territory. While biomedical prevention can help prevent HIV transmission, newly serodiscordant couples may require specific support to help them apply these strategies while navigating new interpersonal commitments.

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