

MAGNETIC

When positive and negative attract, HIV often takes a backseat to that crazy little thing called love. Four couples tell all about negotiating the serodivergent terrain.

For information on HIV prevention, see *HIV and HCV Transmission: Guidelines for Assessing Risk, Fourth Edition, 2004*, published by the Canadian AIDS Society at www.cdnaids.ca. The views expressed in the following interviews are solely those of the people interviewed and do not reflect the policies or opinions of CATIE.

MINNEH, 36, HIV positive for 11 years
HIV educator, part-time janitor
RYAN, 26, HIV negative
Computer programmer
Together since June 29, 2003
Victoria, British Columbia

When Minneh met Ryan:

RYAN: We participated in a lot of the same advocacy groups, like the Cannabis Buyers' Club of Canada, and freedom marches and anti-discrimination groups.

MINNEH: We've been friends since 1999. We met fighting oppression. Ryan used to take me to lunch from time to time. On June 29, 2003, he asked me out and I needed to stop by my place first. When we got there, it just happened. We were sitting together, we drew to a kiss and touched. When we went for lunch that day it was different—it was a date.

Did you know that Minneh had HIV?

RYAN: I'd known since I first met her.

MINNEH: I was involved in HIV and open about my status.

RYAN: At first I was concerned. I didn't really know about HIV or if a relationship was even possible. But once Minneh educated me I wasn't so worried. We take reasonable precautions.

What kind of role does HIV play in your relationship, if at all?

MINNEH: Not a very big part, but we're reminded of it all the time. Ryan's very good at helping me take my meds, reminding me or even getting them for me. It's hard to say that HIV isn't completely in our lives, because it's really right there, but it doesn't affect us that much.

RYAN: HIV is a very, very small part of this relationship.

Are there any issues that have arisen from being in a mixed-status relationship?

MINNEH: It's a good thing I've always been outspoken, because when we visited Ryan's family, they'd already



MINNEH ♥ RYAN

COUPLES

INTERVIEWS BY RONNILYN PUSTIL

“HIV IS A VERY, VERY SMALL PART OF THIS RELATIONSHIP.”

read articles about me and my HIV so it wasn't really a big deal.

RYAN: The only people I've encountered who had any problem with it whatsoever is Immigration Canada.

MINNEH: I was refused permanent residence because of AIDS, and I'm fighting it. I just got a temporary resident permit, so I can stay in Canada for three years. Then I need to renew it and apply again for permanent residence. If I didn't have HIV, I'd already be in the country, which would make mine and Ryan's situation quite easy. It's very frustrating.

Are there any rewards from being in a serodivergent relationship?

RYAN: It's inspired us to start SAN-FAN Educational Group, which stands for "See A Need, Fill A Need." I organize presentations at schools, churches and other public areas, and Minneh educates people about HIV. She talks about prevention and technical information about HIV, and also about what it's like to live with HIV and how it affects your self-worth.

What contributes to the success of your relationship?

MINNEH: The best thing that ever happened to me was finding Ryan. Being spiritual has really helped us. I was waiting to die, but now I'm actually living and wanting a family—something I never thought was possible. I

will die one day, but I will die a truly happy woman.

RYAN: Minneh and I are both very close to God and that is the foundation of our relationship.

How do you deal with the fear of HIV transmission?

MINNEH: We use condoms faithfully.

Has HIV affected your sex life or intimacy?

RYAN: I don't think so.

MINNEH: No. Putting on a condom has become part of having sex.

How do you deal with the grey areas when it comes to transmission?

RYAN: Because Minneh has such a low viral load, I don't worry about oral sex. We just go ahead, really.

Are there other kinds of fears you deal with in a mixed-status relationship?

MINNEH: They have to do with the medications I take for my bipolar condition. In order to get pregnant, I'd have to stop those meds and I don't know if I'd be emotionally stable enough to be able to carry a pregnancy. That's something we think about. I'd love to have another child. But we'd like to get married first.

RYAN: We're getting married on May 21, 2005.

MINNEH: We don't know if my immigration will be settled by then, but we just go on with life. There's HIV,

there's Minneh, and there's immigration—in no particular order. I must carry on, moment by moment, otherwise it would be such a waste of time just sitting around worrying about it.

Ryan, how involved are you when it comes to Minneh's treatment?

RYAN: I'm pretty much there every step of the way. I go with her to the doctor. I don't actually suffer the side effects with her or anything like that, but I'm fairly involved.

MINNEH: I feel very well supported. I remember walking to the lab by myself, going to the doctor's office and getting all confused. Now Ryan goes with me, and we talk about it later and I understand more what the doctor was saying. He's a great friend as well as a good lover.

Are your families and friends supportive of your relationship?

MINNEH: Very much. We're very fortunate that way.

Advice for other magnetic couples:

RYAN: Educate yourselves and be very communicative.

MINNEH: Before HIV is the person themselves. That's how you should approach your relationship—as human beings. Then HIV and other issues come in later. Remember that you are people first and foremost.

For workshops contact:

SAN-FAN Educational Group

250.661.7357; www.SAN-FAN.com



BRIAN ♥ NEAL

BRIAN, 43, HIV positive for 14 years
Outreach and partnership coordinator
NEAL, 31, HIV negative
Footwear product manager
Together since October 20, 2002
Toronto, Ontario

When Brian met Neal:

NEAL: Brian was a one-night stand.

BRIAN: We met online and decided to meet at a bar.

NEAL: I met him for a drink, but then I had to run home to see *Alias*.

BRIAN: We got along really well, so I invited him back to my hotel room to watch *Alias* and I promised I wouldn't do anything—and I didn't.

NEAL: That's the absolute truth. I was really intrigued with Brian. He was here on business for two weeks and each night we'd have dinner, then go back to his hotel room and watch TV. We didn't have sex for two weeks after we met.

BRIAN: We went on a date for two weeks.

NEAL: It was total dating. Is that unheard of?

BRIAN: It was a first for both of us.

NEAL: Brian moved to Toronto a few weeks later. He said, "Let's get a two-bedroom. If things don't work out, we can just be roommates." There's been no need for a second bedroom—it's my shoe room.

How did you disclose your HIV status to Neal?

BRIAN: I disclosed to Neal online, so he knew from the minute we met. I

always disclose because it's a trust issue right up-front for me. When we started to discuss moving in together, we talked about me being positive and what it could mean down the road. I told Neal, "There could be a time when I get sick. I don't know when, so now's the time to say you don't want to do that part." I can handle rejection up-front, but I don't want to be with somebody who leaves me when I'm sick. You want to make sure the person you commit time to isn't going to bolt at the first sign of trouble. Financial trouble is one thing, relationship stuff is one thing, but if you're sick that's another thing.

NEAL: I couldn't believe Brian was putting this to me, but I'm glad he did. I thought: "Just because he's HIV positive doesn't mean I can't love this man. Does he not deserve to be loved? And why can't I be loved by him? I don't care if he gets sick. We'll deal with that when the time comes." I don't know if I verbalized that to him, but I know I did say "shut up."

What kind of role does HIV play in your relationship?

BRIAN: HIV helps me not waste a lot of time, which is probably why we moved so fast in living together. If I wasn't positive, I might have taken more time.

NEAL: HIV plays a bigger role for Brian. For me, it's a very minute aspect in our lives. But, for instance, if Brian's having a tired day, we have a slower, more relaxed day than one that's go-

go-go. It's not a big deal, it's just about balance.

Are there any issues that have arisen from being in a mixed-status couple?

BRIAN: I've been fully disclosed and very public about my HIV status, so it's not an issue for me. But I worry about Neal because it's difficult when I'm with his family. I'm not sure who knows. I have to let him tell people at his own pace.

NEAL: I'm very protective of me, in terms of how I'm bombarded with questions from my family. Coming from an ethnic family, just being gay was a huge thing. When I came out to them, their biggest fear was: "You're going to get HIV and die." I could only do one hurdle at a time. I wasn't capable or willing to jump the other hurdle. I guess I got complacent. Certain family members know about Brian's HIV and others don't need to know. Brian's part of the family, he's accepted as my other half—my better half, maybe.

Are there any rewards from being in a serodivergent relationship?

BRIAN: You're a bit more grown up about a relationship.

NEAL: It exposes me to a lot more than I would have known on my own. That's definitely a plus. Because of that, I've become a board member with a local AIDS organization, where I can help promote awareness.

What contributes to the success of your relationship?

BRIAN: Being honest. For me, disclosure was honesty right up-front, and that sets the pattern for a relationship. Also, the idea that we're not in it for the short term—if there's an issue, we try to talk and work our way through it. I think we're slightly successful in that, but I won't say we're 100%.

NEAL: We respect each other's lives and there's an open flow of communication that's always there. So, we've got communication, respect and honesty.

BRIAN: I have a lot of respect for Neal. There are a lot of people who would run scared in the other direction for the smallest of reasons, and this is one big reason. I've had rejection around my HIV status. An HIV negative person who runs in the other direction is probably doing you a favour because they're going to run eventually anyways.

How do you deal with the fear of HIV transmission?

BRIAN: I know that condoms work when you use them consistently and correctly, so that's just become a part of life. The concept of not practicing safer sex was never an option, it's not even a discussion that ever happens. I don't have a huge fear in terms of HIV transmission, but I'm the positive person. I fear being exposed to other STDs, so honesty is really important because other STDs could be a big threat to me.

NEAL: I grew up in the era of safe sex. The safe-sex campaign was full-blown when I was at the most impressionable age, becoming aware of my sexual identity and freedoms. I've never had sex without a condom. It's a natural course of life and I'm very comfortable with it. I've never had an STD or anything to worry about, so for me it's not a concern.

Are there other fears that you deal with in your relationship?

BRIAN: Every time I come back from the doctor, if there are any changes in my health I discuss it with Neal. My counts have been the same for about seven years, but I make sure he knows everything's fine.

NEAL: I have the normal fears anyone else has: What does tomorrow hold? Will I have a job? Is Brian going to get hit by a bus if he doesn't watch

when he's crossing the street? I don't know if my fears are all HIV-related.

Is the fear of Brian getting hit by a bus is equal to the fear of Brian getting sick?

NEAL: Yes.

BRIAN: HIV is probably more persistent and on your mind though, because I take pills twice a day, so there's a constant reminder. I think the other way it fits into that is the long-term planning. We're slowly starting to talk about longer-term things, like buying a place. I never would have done that at one time because having HIV limits your view into the future. Planning a holiday next year isn't one of my strengths. Neal likes to plan longer term, so it's a good balance. I don't let him go beyond a year and he tries to get me up to a year.

Has HIV affected your sex life or intimacy?

BRIAN: I don't think so.

NEAL: Because I knew from Day One that Brian was HIV positive, it hasn't hindered our sex life in any way. Not sleeping with him in the beginning wasn't because he had HIV. It was because I thought I liked him and I wanted to see if it would work, if there was any substance there. And there was.

How do you achieve intimacy while protecting yourself from HIV?

NEAL: F—ing isn't everything there is to sex. We achieve intimacy on so many different levels—cuddling, holding hands while we walk down the street, the special gaze we have in each other's eyes.

BRIAN: We have date night once a week, no matter how busy we are, when we go to dinner and spend time debriefing. It's going to the movies and all the other things you do together that make your relationship.

Sex is just one piece of intimacy. There's so much more.

What about the grey areas when it comes to transmission?

NEAL: I'm going to get a little graphic here: When it comes to oral sex, we take pleasure in it and we enjoy receiving and giving it. In terms of transmitting fluids, we're a lot more cautious and aware of our actions, and we let each other know what's going to happen next.

BRIAN: After many years of being positive, talking to other people, doing prevention workshops and knowing the guidelines, I know that the grey areas are just that. Sometimes you live your life in the grey areas. Crossing the street between lights is a grey area for getting hit by a car, but it doesn't stop you from doing it. So, looking at oral sex, knowing the facts and being aware of the precautions you can take is common sense. It's no longer a grey area anymore. You just do it and you know. It's lack of knowledge that creates grey areas.

Neal, how involved are you when it comes to Brian's treatment?

NEAL: Not in the least. Brian's so self-sufficient and organized that I don't see a need to step in at this point. When there is, I'll be ready to.

Have your families and friends been supportive of your relationship?

NEAL: One hundred percent.

BRIAN: Yeah, me too.

NEAL: If they could, I think my family would trade me in for Brian.

Advice for other magnetic couples:

NEAL: Be yourself. Don't be self-conscious. Life is too short. You just need to live it.

BRIAN: HIV is just one aspect of life. It doesn't make a person a different person; it's just a part of who you are. As long as nobody's trying to infect someone else and there's no power imbalance, enjoy and be yourself.



GARY, 48, HIV positive for 3 years
Engineer

DAVID, 32, HIV negative
Medical writer
Together for 10 years
Montreal, Quebec

When Gary met David:

GARY: We met 10 years ago at a coming-out group at McGill University.

When you were diagnosed, how did you deal with it together?

GARY: I was first diagnosed in London, England, in December 2001. I'd gone to see a doctor about an STD, and they performed an HIV test as part of the lab tests. I'd tested negative in September 2001, so I thought it would be OK. I got the result a couple weeks later—the antibodies had come back positive. I was in total denial. I was traveling, David was in Montreal, and I wasn't able to tell him over the phone. We met up in Europe a couple weeks later and I told him. The HIV test was repeated in January 2002 in Montreal with the same result.

David, what was your reaction?

DAVID: I was numb. My immediate reaction was to reach out to the man I loved who was having such a hard time telling me. When we returned home, I tried to make life as normal as possible. But a few months later, I couldn't deny it any longer—I needed some help. I went to a counsellor.

GARY: I was also in therapy to deal with the HIV and some childhood issues. I went for a year and then we decided to see a couple's counsellor. Now we have our couple's counsellor and I'm in a support group with other positive men at ACCM [AIDS Community Care Montreal].

To what extent does HIV factor into your relationship?

DAVID: Most importantly, it's impacted our life as a couple—emotionally, socially, sexually.

GARY: It has impacted all aspects.



GARY ♥ DAVID

Was your relationship pre-HIV very different from your relationship now?

GARY: Yes. Definitely.

What are the main issues you've had to deal with as a mixed-status couple?

DAVID: On a daily level, there is living with not being 100% well and having to be flexible around that. If Gary's not feeling up to doing something, we both get frustrated. As well, disclosure is an issue for us.

GARY: More recently sex has become an issue. Our sex is totally different now.

How do you deal with the sex issue?

GARY: Mostly by not having sex. A couple of weeks ago I decided I didn't want to have sex because I don't want my partner, who I love, to become infected.

DAVID: I know Gary will do absolutely everything in his power to protect me from becoming infected. I can feel no safer than that. When it comes to our sex life, HIV has done some really great things and some terrible things. Over the last two years our sex life has fluctuated. There have been times when we feel close sexually. There was a period when the

sex was very good, more intimate and emotional than ever.

Recently, we've come to realize how scared we are of having sex with each other because of the HIV. I'm dreadfully afraid of becoming infected. And now that it's at the surface, we have to deal with it. Our sex life for the last six months has been non-existent. It hurts, disappoints and frustrates me, but I believe that by working through the issue we'll come back together. We'll get the fear out, get over it and get to a place where we're comfortable playing again. That's happening now, but it takes a lot more communication. Though it happens less frequently, we have good sex.

GARY: I hope that with lots of communication and support we'll get closer again and I'll be more comfortable having sex without always being afraid of infecting David.

How do you achieve intimacy while protecting each other from HIV?

DAVID: We've always had a creative sex life, so it's easy to keep exploring areas that are safe in terms of HIV transmission. There hasn't been a big shift away from high-risk to low-

risk behaviours. As for emotional intimacy, that comes from us plucking up the courage to be frank and honest with each other. That is bringing me much closer to Gary.

GARY: Right now, sex is important but not as important as bringing us together emotionally.

Are there any rewards from being in a serodivergent relationship?

GARY: It's made me enjoy life more, at least try to, even though sometimes it's hard because the HIV is always in the background. It pops up and sometimes puts you down. I'm trying to see the positive side of life.

DAVID: It's really made me appreciate having Gary around. You can either bemoan the fact that you're not going to be around forever or you can do the best you can with every day you have. And we try that every day. We're not always successful, but we try.

What other fears do you deal with in a mixed-status relationship?

DAVID: The day my man's not going to be here. Because Gary has been fairly healthy up until now, HIV as an illness rarely affects us. He's been in the hospital a couple of times, and that's when it really hits me that this is a disease.

How involved are you when it comes to Gary's treatment?

DAVID: I get involved when Gary asks me to. Gary looks to me as a resource for information because with my background I can look at primary research or treatment guidelines and help him interpret them. I don't get involved in Gary's treatment decisions—it's between him and his physician. I give more emotional support. But I also have my own issues with it, so there are times

when I consciously or unconsciously ignore Gary's trips to the doctor. I just don't want to deal with it.

GARY: David was there to support me for the first couple of trips to the doctor, but he was never involved in the treatment decisions. Neither was I in the beginning—I agreed to whatever the doctor decided. When I started thinking seriously about taking treatment for my hepatitis C, I became more involved by reading up about the side effects. And now that I'm on a new HIV medication, I'm much more informed.

Sometimes I have to remind David that I've gone to the doctor. I want to tell him. Sometimes it's good news, sometimes it's bad news, but most of the time it's pretty good because my numbers have gone down or up, and you want to tell everyone that.

It sounds like you both really want to make your relationship work.

DAVID: Over the last two years we've almost ended the relationship at least twice. Every so often I still think to myself, "I'm out of here. This is too much." I'm in a support group at ACCM for the negative partners of serodiscordant couples. It's been an amazing help to share with people who are going through the same thing.

Last year when Gary and I were going through a rough time, I brought it up in the group. The moderator said two things that resonated deeply. The first was that Gary is a man with worth. He said, "You better be very careful about throwing that man

away if you're thinking of leaving."

The other equally important thing he said was that if I was running away from the relationship because I was running away from HIV, I should reconsider; in this

world I cannot escape it. Those two key points carry me through a lot of rough times.

Has being in a mixed-status relationship placed certain roles on each of you?

DAVID: Up until Gary seroconverted, he was the caregiver. Now it's become plain that Gary can't always be the caregiver, nor should he have to be. It's allowed us to both be caregivers.

You mentioned something about disclosure being an issue.

DAVID: We've decided that since this is Gary's information, it's up to him to tell who he wants when he's ready. This became an issue for me because I also needed support. I told a few people without Gary's permission and that caused friction. But now Gary's much more open about it and I've established a support network.

GARY: In the beginning I didn't want anyone to know about my status because I felt it was something bad, that it had a certain stigma attached to it. Now it's much better. Most key people in my life know.

Are your families and friends supportive of your relationship?

GARY: Yes, definitely.

DAVID: Everyone.

GARY: In the beginning, the biggest fear is that you tell someone and they'll say they don't want to be a part of your life.

DAVID: I can't think of anyone who's backed away from our relationship because of it.

Advice for other magnetic couples:

GARY: See a good therapist.

DAVID: For us, it comes down to one word: *communication*. Each couple has to come up with their own set of words. Ours are: communicate, be patient and have respect.

GARY: And be honest with each other.



SUE, 37, HIV positive for 15 years
Administrator

JEFF, 38, HIV negative
Insurance adjuster
Married for 10 years
Ottawa, Ontario

When Sue met Jeff:

SUE: We met in high school and then dated off and on for 10 years because Jeff was living in Toronto. There were gaps when we weren't in touch, but then we'd spend a weekend together and it was like we were never apart. We got back together in 1993 and married in '94. On September 7th we'd been together for 20 years!

What happened when you told Jeff you had HIV?

SUE: I told him on the phone because he was in Toronto. I didn't know how to tell him. Back in the early '90s things were a lot different. I didn't know how he would react.

JEFF: I saw it as an illness. I wasn't taken aback by it. I was very concerned and supportive. She was my sweetheart, my love, and it didn't matter.

To what extent does HIV factor in your relationship?

JEFF: It's a daily part of our lives, but I don't dwell in the HIV world as much as Sue does.

SUE: I haven't been ill, so we try to live our lives like HIV isn't a factor. We have a 14-year-old daughter and we both have jobs. HIV is there but it doesn't control our family life.

You have a daughter?

SUE: I was ecstatic that I was pregnant. I found out I had HIV because my obstetrician said I should have an HIV test. When the test came back positive I was terrified that the baby would also be HIV positive.

Does your daughter know you have HIV?

SUE: She's known since she was 8, when she asked why I take so many pills. I told her I have a virus, and she said, "like in the computer?" I figured I could work with that. I told her that when there's a virus in the computer all the programs don't run properly and sometimes the computer shuts down. If the virus in my

body is making my body not work properly, at some point my body is going to shut down. I also told her that the virus was asleep and we'd worry about it if the virus woke up.

Are there any issues that have arisen from being in a mixed-status relationship?

SUE: We've had people assume that Jeff and our daughter also have HIV, but I'm the only one who does. Other issues have been pretty much medical—starting new drugs, side effects, throwing up first thing in the morning. If I'm not well or I'm moody or lacking physical energy, it's hard on the family because everyone has to do more around the house.

JEFF: But that's not a major issue. Like any family dealing with any illness, the other family members would pick up the slack.

Are there any rewards from being in a serodivergent relationship?

JEFF: My life before Sue didn't involve anybody who was HIV positive. I didn't know or care about HIV. But from being with Sue I've learned that there is more to life than being... I don't know how to say this...

SUE: A white, heterosexual male? *(laughter)*

JEFF: It's opened my eyes to a whole real world out there that I'd never seen. I've met so many fascinating and informative people in the HIV community.

SUE: This relationship has given me the calmness and security of knowing that Jeff will be here for our daughter if I'm not. That has helped me medically because I'm not stressed out about what will happen to her. I also know every day that I'm loved and cared for.

JEFF: Sue having HIV has shown me that there's more to a relationship than just good times.

What contributes to the success of your relationship?

SUE: He makes me laugh.

JEFF: Golf. And lots of it. *(laughter)* I'm kidding. We always find time for us. There are times where we're apart and I may not like it, but the quality



SUE ♥ JEFF

time turns out great. We also don't dwell on the HIV factor.

SUE: HIV doesn't overwhelm our lives at this point. We can't make it go away, but we can try to control it and live our lives to the fullest.



How do you deal with the fear of HIV transmission?

JEFF: It's no different from when I was single. I was aware of sexually transmitted infections when I was younger, so protecting myself from HIV didn't invoke any fears.

SUE: When Jeff re-entered my life, he knew full well that I was HIV positive. It was his choice to come back to this relationship. I still have that underlying fear, but he's still negative.

JEFF: I've had two HIV tests. My general practitioner convinced me to get tested just to ensure that I was OK.

SUE: We do have unprotected sex. It happens. I don't know what else to say.

JEFF: It's happened a few times. The moment just takes over, and because we attempt to live as a healthy couple we sometimes have sex just as any healthy couple would. We do try very hard to have protected sex though.

Are there other kinds of fears you deal with in a mixed-status relationship?

SUE: I know that one day I'm going to end up a client at the agency where I work. I know I'm going to be sick one day.

JEFF: I know that one day Sue could get very ill and that's going to hurt our family in a lot of ways. We're a two-income family and taking away half of the income would hurt. Sue is a strong figure in our family, and it would be hard to replace her contributions, both physically and mentally.

SUE: I was on disability for a while. And I see how hard it is for people on government disability plans to make ends meet. So, it's a financial burden that we fear.

JEFF: I really can't say that I fear Sue getting sick. In every relationship someone can get sick, and as you get older things happen physically, so why fear sickness? SUE: And he'll be older before I am. *(laughter)*

Has HIV affected your intimacy?

JEFF: No, Sue having HIV does not affect our intimacy. Just like any other couple that works full-time and raises a family, in our busy lives intimacy is hard to come by.

How do you deal with the grey areas when it comes to transmission?

SUE: We didn't have sex for the longest time when my viral load was high. And we don't have sex when I have my period, even protected sex. It's not a place we want to go. Why put that risk out there? It's only a week . . . he can go without!

JEFF: We've been having oral sex since Day One.

SUE: It was actually Day Three, hon. *(laughter)*

So you weigh the risks and benefits.

SUE: Absolutely.
JEFF: I've decided what I'm doing in this relationship. My goal is to have a "normal" relationship. I know that by having unprotected intercourse and oral sex with Sue I could get infected, but I can walk out of my house and get hit by a car. I love Sue and I want her to enjoy her life to the fullest.

You seem pretty informed about HIV.

JEFF: If I have a question, Sue answers it. She's a walking encyclopedia. And I trust her. I'm very fortunate in that sense.

How involved are you when it comes to Sue's treatment?

JEFF: Marginally.
SUE: If I want to go on a structured treatment interruption, the choice is mine and I have to weigh the risks and benefits. Jeff and I discuss it, but

I'm the one who goes to the doctor and says "I want to go off meds," because that decision is mine.

Has being in a serodivergent relationship placed certain roles on each of you?

JEFF: When I go to HIV conferences I'm known as "Sue's husband," and I've grown accustomed to that.

SUE: Since I've been giving workshops on serodivergent relationships, I seem to have fallen into a role where I'm asked by people I've never met before how the relationship and the sex work. I tell people that magnetic relationships like mine and Jeff's can work well with lots of hard work.

Magnetic?

SUE: The title of my workshop is "The Magnetic Couple: The Positives and the Negatives in the Serodivergent Relationship." *Serodiscordant* assumes that there's discord in the relationship, so I really try not to use that term. *Divergent* means different.

Are your families and friends supportive of your relationship?

SUE: He's the only boyfriend my mother ever liked.

JEFF: For the most part, my family's been supportive. However, some of my family and friends found out through the grapevine and were very obtuse.

SUE: "Don't use a glass that she used, don't smoke that joint with her," stuff like that.

JEFF: Sue's mother, stepmother and father are very supportive, as is the rest of her family.

Advice for other magnetic couples:

JEFF: Live for today and love the one you're with, because love is the best medicine.

SUE: You can't let HIV overrule everything in your life. It's a component of your life, but it can't be the overwhelming force that absorbs everything else.

To contact Sue about workshops:

613.729.0911
sasp@cheerful.com