

AIDS IS NOT A PUNISHMENT:

Overcoming Guilt and Shame

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If you sometimes feel that HIV has stolen the meaning and purpose of your life, you are not alone. Having HIV has forced many people to examine themselves and life in general.

Unfortunately, some religions and elements of our culture have spread the idea that AIDS is a punishment for sin. This may cause HIV+ people to feel that they are being penalized for bad behavior or immoral lifestyles.

Believing that your HIV status is a punishment is not uncommon and can lead to negative feelings such as depression and low self-esteem. These feelings can be detrimental to your physical and emotional health. (For example, depression is one of the key factors associated with missing doses of HIV drugs.)

You do not have to accept the guilt and shame that others want to put on you! You will be healthier, spiritually and physically, if you don't. Research has shown that there is some connection between people who have a positive spiritual outlook and the strength of their immune system.

If you feel guilty because choices you made led to your becoming HIV infected, try to remember that everyone makes mistakes in life. If you feel guilty for just existing (being who you are), try to come to a place of self-acceptance.

Left unresolved, these feelings of guilt can lead to shame. Shame has been defined in Webster's dictionary as "a painful emotion caused by a strong sense of guilt." Shame invades the mind and the body. It is not Godly or spiritual. Remember:

- Spirituality has to do with love. Love yourself, treat yourself well and

move towards wholeness.

- Spirituality moves you to have faith in yourself and live in your purpose.
- Spirituality also means finding a safe place, with safe people who will love you and have faith in you as you live out your purpose.

HIV is an illness. No one can be blamed for being sick. Try and use HIV as a tool of growth rather than as a reason for feeling bad about yourself. Work on building a positive perception of yourself. This may restore feelings of hope that have been lost.

Use your HIV status in a positive way – as a wakeup call to examine yourself, get in touch with your purpose and make better choices. Move beyond guilt and shame towards spiritual growth and wellness.

You may need help moving beyond negative feelings about HIV that are causing depression, guilt or shame. Get the help you need. Addressing these issues will not only make it more likely that you will be adherent to your HIV medications, it could improve your overall quality of life as well.

For more information and resources, go to:

The Body, Religion and AIDS:
www.thebody.com/religion.html

Council of Religious AIDS Networks, AIDS Ministry Database:
www.aidsfaith.com/ministry/ministry.asp 

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