

How HIV-positive young adults navigate love



Participants pose for a photo during the launch of Y+ beauty pageant in Kampala on September 27, 2024.

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Helping young adults living with HIV become confident in relationships, especially romantic or sexual ones, can be difficult due to stigma, fear of rejection, and misinformation.

But here are some ways a parent can support their child living with HIV:

Understand that HIV is now manageable. Help them understand that HIV is a chronic but manageable illness with modern treatment Antiretroviral Treatment (ART). With proper care, they can live long, healthy lives and have safe, fulfilling relationships. As a parent, you can share with your child success stories and role models of people living openly and happily with HIV. Reinforce that they are not their diagnosis.

Address stigma: Many young adults living with HIV struggle with fear and shame or guilt associated with HIV/Aids. Provide safe spaces (support groups, therapy, and peer mentorship) where they can talk openly without judgement. Encourage self-compassion and remind them that being HIV-positive doesn't make them "damaged" or "unlovable."

Empower them with disclosure skills: Fear of rejection often comes from anxiety around disclosing their status, therefore, equip them with tools to decide when and how to disclose. Having them share their status will go a long way towards building self-confidence (e.g., in a private, safe, and honest way), understand that rejection says more about the other person than about their worth, and practice role-playing conversations to reduce anxiety.

Encourage positive living: If they are unable to abstain from sex, encourage them to engage only in safe sex practices

such as using a condom, adherence to ART, keeping hospital appointments, eating a balance diet so that their body is able to build and support their immune system and post-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for partners.

Promote positive body image and self-worth: Many young adults living with HIV worry they are "less attractive" or "less desirable." Encourage self-love through positive affirmations, therapy or support groups focused on identity and self-image, and social spaces that celebrate and support people living with HIV.

Encourage association with supportive groups: Isolation is common, especially after diagnosis. Encourage connection with supportive groups through HIV-positive youth organisations, online forums and safe social platforms. Seeing others living with HIV can be incredibly empowering.

Support their mental health: Encourage regular access to counselling or mental health services, especially if they show signs of stress, depression, anxiety, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) due to ill health or their diagnosis. Counselling will help them cope with trauma and grief.

Encourage open conversations about love and intimacy: Talk with them about relationships openly and not just the risks, but the joys of connection, emotional intimacy, and love. Reassure them that they deserve affection, companionship, and passion like anyone else.

Young adults living with HIV/Aids need to feel confident and empowered in relationships and parents need to support them build confidence in relationships where they can feel safe to learn, love, and live.