

# Love beyond the virus: How discordant couples can thrive together

Nakalema and Ssemwogerere's journey demonstrates a powerful truth to every couple, discordance does not have to doom your love, it can refine it into something truly luminous and unbreakable. With honest dialogue, diligent habits, and a supportive community, you hold the pen to write your own enduring romance, one hopeful step at a time.

BY ELVIS BASUDDE KYEYUNE

In Bweyogerere, Central Region, Prossy Nakalema, 36, and her husband Luke Ssemwogerere, 40, have nurtured an 11-year marriage glowing with resilience, laughter, and unshakeable devotion. Six years in, their idyllic life fractured when Ssemwogerere grappled with a merciless cough that spiralled into tuberculosis, and the gut-wrenching diagnosis of HIV positivity.

For agonising weeks, he wrestled with the secret, haunted by nightmares of their shared home dissolving into silence. Then, one crisp morning over shared tea, he mustered the courage to confess everything, his voice trembling yet resolute. Nakalema's world blurred with tears for days, a storm of disbelief and heartache. She tested negative repeatedly, over exhaustive months and a full year of vigilance.

"How come? My husband is positive and I am negative!" she marvelled, her words still laced with that initial astonishment. Their journey spotlighted HIV discordance where one partner is HIV-positive, while the other remains uninfected amid intimacy.

Dr Anthony Sematimba at Njeru Health Centre in Buikwe District demystifies it: "It is entirely real, influenced by genetics, viral strains, infection timing, STIs, ART adherence, condom consistency, and male circumcision; which WHO studies show slashes transmission risk by up to 60 percent for men." Globally, discordant couples number in the millions; WHO notes transmissions often arise from untreated positives with high viral loads or external sources. The game-changer? "U=U" (Undetectable = Untransmittable): ART reduces risk to near zero. WHO's 2022 guidelines mandate immediate treatment for all positives, especially discordant pairs, bypassing CD4 thresholds.

## A hidden reality and a path forward

Uganda grapples with an HIV prevalence of six percent among adults aged 15-49, according to the 2022 Uganda Population HIV Impact Assessment, which means about 1.4 million people are living with the virus. Dr Sematimba estimates that six percent of sexually active Ugandans are in undiagnosed discordant unions, where one partner is HIV-positive and the other is negative,

and shockingly, only 20-25 percent of couples get tested together.

Even more alarming, 66 percent of

## THERAPY

Embrace therapy as a game-changer. Work with counsellors to reweave the threads of trust that discordance might fray, banish lingering grief through guided talks, and fan the flames of romance by rediscovering joy and playfulness together.

new infections happen within married pairs, often because men avoid follow-up testing after their partner's antenatal check-ups. Stigma spreads quietly like whispers in the dark, dividing families and fueling fear, but stories of hope and resilience show us there is a brighter way forward.

Counsellor Robinah Nanyonga at the AIDS Information Centre (AIC) puts it simply:

"Discordance hits like a bolt of lightning, bringing disbelief, blame, and a storm of 'what ifs' that can tear couples apart. But with the right support, that pain turns into real power." Just listen to Nakalema and Ssemwogerere's story: Three years ago, AIDS nearly destroyed Ssemwogerere, his weight dropped sharply, fevers kept him bedridden, and doctors gave grim warnings. Yet Nakalema, his HIV-negative wife, never wavered.

"Our love was my anchor through it all," she says with a warm smile. They had built a beautiful life together; two thriving children aged 5 and 7, cosy sunset walks holding hands, and big dreams of family holidays by Lake Victoria. The thought of leaving him? It was simply unthinkable. Instead, they chose abstinence from penetrative sex, dove into counselling sessions, and joined AIC's Couple Club, which launched in 2012.

This safe space for peers breaks down blame, teaches protection methods, promotes family planning, and fights stigma head-on.

"It was like being reborn," Ssemwogerere shares. "Our church prayers mixed with unwavering love healed us from the inside out. And our intimacy now? It's deeper than ever, built on layers of trust and understanding."

## The Couple Club has changed lives

With triumphs such as Sarah and Joseph's, who have been members since 2015, navigating years of discordance where Sarah tested positive. With steady ART treatment, they conceived a healthy child using pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for Joseph, and they even tied the knot last year. "We turned our deepest fears into a growing family," Sarah says, her eyes shining with pride.

## Tips for discordant couples to thrive

For couples facing discordance, success starts with fostering open communication as a daily habit. Set up regular ritual check-ins, like Nakalema and Ssemwogerere's evening strolls around the neighborhood, where you unpack hidden fears, celebrate small wins in treatment or health, and remind each other of your unbreakable love, no judgments, just honest talk that keeps you connected.

Prioritising protection is non-negotiable to prevent transmission. Use condoms every single time during sex, paired with water-based lubricant to avoid breakage or discomfort, and consider PrEP for the negative partner if they're eligible through local clinics, it is a daily pill that blocks HIV effectively when taken right.

Committing to treatment and testing builds a strong foundation. The positive partner must stick to their ART meds without fail, as it suppresses the virus to undetectable levels, while both of you schedule quarterly duo-tests at AIC or public health centers to catch any issues early and adjust plans quickly.

Building mutual care strengthens your bond beyond the bedroom. If you're the negative partner, step up as a true pillar, set phone reminders for their pills, cook nutrient-rich Ugandan meals such as matooke stews loaded with peanuts and veggies for immune-boosting power, and offer plenty of cuddles without any pressure for more, showing love in the everyday moments.

Finally, nurture non-sexual intimacy to keep the spark alive in fresh ways. Dance together to your favorite Bongo beats in the living room, give each other relaxing massages after a long day, or dive into shared hobbies like gardening or watching local football matches, these build emotional closeness that makes your relationship richer and more resilient.

## Overcoming stigma

Battling stigma starts by rallying allies into your corner. Reach out to trusted friends, family members who will not judge, or join a Couple Club meeting for that instant solidarity, surround yourself with people who lift you up and remind you that you are not alone.

Master the facts to shut down myths. Grab free resources from WHO or AIC that explain how discordance is possible and manageable with modern science, share them confidently to educate others and reclaim your narrative from ignorance.

Demand your rights without apology. Push local clinics and hospitals to offer couple-friendly services like joint testing and counselling, because no one should face this divided, advocate politely but firmly for the support you deserve.

