



OVERCOMING HIV STIGMA

Living with HIV can already be traumatising enough, however, people who are HIV positive usually also have to deal with stigma on top of the challenges of living with the illness.

Avert defines HIV stigma as any type of discrimination or negative attitudes targeted towards someone who is HIV positive because of their status. The result of this is people being treated unfairly, being insulted, gossiped about and excluded from an entire community. For example, the person can find themselves not being allowed to receive access to quality healthcare, they can lose family, friends or romantic relationships, or can be treated differently at school or in the workplace.

Stigma usually comes from fear (of the unknown) and a lack of understanding. Fear comes from how HIV is largely associated with death as well as taboo issues like sex, homosexuality, drug abuse, prostitution and infidelity. These things are seen as a lack of morals therefore making people believe that becoming infected is the person's fault. Education on this matter would help reduce stigma.

The South African National Aids Council (SANAC) identifies four types of stigma:

- **External stigma** refers to others discriminating against you due to your status
- **Internalised stigma** occurs when the HIV positive person starts to believe the negative opinions of others and begins thinking negatively of themselves and other HIV positive people
- **Anticipated stigma** happens when someone expects to be treated differently because of their status
- **Curtesy stigma** is the experience of stigma because of associating with someone who is HIV positive

Therefore, the overall effect that stigma has on an individual is extremely negative. The fear of revealing your status to friends, family, your romantic partner and co-workers can be so overwhelming that you would rather keep it to yourself. This means that you end up suffering alone with no support from those around you.

This is why it is important for non-HIV positive people to become knowledgeable about HIV and the challenges of living with the illness in order to be more sensitive and accommodating to those who are infected. Regardless of whether someone is HIV positive or not, they still deserve to be treated the same.



For confidential assistance on health matters, contact your
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