

Why Disclose Your Status? Because When It Comes to HIV, You Cannot Survive Alone



Sabina Biolane was able to turn her life around once she accepted her diagnosis and sought treatment and support. Now she is an inspiration to others who are living with HIV or AIDS.

Sabina Biolane, 35, is a single mother who lives with her 2-year-old daughter in Bapong, a small village near Brits, South Africa. She's had HIV for 10 years now and says she feels a sense of pride when she recounts stories from a decade spent overcoming stigma and obstacles.

"I live with HIV," Sabina says, explaining that others can do the same, but not by themselves. "You cannot survive alone," she maintains. "You need help because when you start getting sick, you have to rely on others for food and care or you will lose everything. If you have disclosed your status, you can get the support you need, so it is better to be open."

It is not easy to tell others, though, especially at first. Sabina admits that she has encountered rejection when disclosing her own status, but she never gave up. Since she began talking openly about being HIV-positive, many people approach her for support and advice. "After I spoke to counselors and my family, I started to accept my status and I joined Madibeng Support Group for PLWH," Sabina acknowledges.

"People asked me questions and thanked me for giving them the support and information they needed," she says. The way she manages her illness—and how she deals with HIV stigma—encourages others to disclose their own status.

Sabina started ART in August 2004 when her CD4 count dipped to minus-1 and she weighed only 39kg. She also had TB, an infection that kills many people living with HIV.

By July 2006, her CD4 count had increased to 761, her viral load was undetectable, and her weight increased to 65kg. After two years on treatment, Sabina is living proof of the efficacy of the life-saving medication. Today, Sabina receives treatment at Brits Hospital's ARV Clinic thanks to a PEPFAR-funded Twinning Center partnership linking the South Africa-based Foundation for Professional Development with Brits Hospital ARV Clinic.

As a volunteer at the clinic, Sabina was such a source of hope and inspiration to the other HIV patients that clinic managers decided to employ her as a counselor.

By disclosing her HIV-positive status, Sabina has not only been able to access the treatment she needs, but also to obtain a job, learn new and marketable skills, and boost her self-esteem.

Noting that she has overcome the stigma and discrimination and is fighting the virus every day, a satisfied smile softens her features and she says she will continue to meet with others who have HIV because of the support and respect she both gives and receives.

"I feel very happy," Sabina professes. "Everyone is OK with me."