

Testing ... testing ... HIV

Body Language

Shani Raviv

Getting tested for HIV is about as enticing as sleeping with a new partner for the first time with a condom that the government distributed. It's a rough ride. Even if you were faithful to your ex-partners and celibate in between. Even if you only had sex using condoms or went to reliable clinics for blood tests or don't think you ever shot up, although you can't really remember.

Getting tested for HIV is a bitch even if you've been tested a dozen times. Even if you had a one-night stand but he just slipped it in and whipped it out, or went through the back door or the trap door. And even if you know that you could afford anti-retrovirals if you tested positive. Because HIV penetrates our consciousness. Hard.

Many people I know dealing their cards with poker faces in the dating game might as well be armed. They can be well educated, spiritually awake and have common sense, but when it comes to getting tested it's the one time they resort to ignominious abstinence. Because many still fear that the "wrong" result would be a death sentence.

The nurse who tested me the other day said: "People's reaction is often 'I'm going to die!' But we are all going to die — if you are HIV positive you just might know how you are going to die."

But a lot of people don't want to know. So instead they make excuses as weak as the health minister's take on diet as the "cure" for Aids. They say they don't need to get tested because their partner promised that



Getting tested for HIV is about as enticing as sleeping with a new partner and using a government-distributed condom. Photo: Shani Raviv

she was clear — even if she can't remember the name of the last guy she slept with. Or they say they've already been tested — last year — but have started sleeping with some guy with a reputation as big as the reason they are sleeping with him in the first place. Or, they tell you so convincingly that it almost sounds like they believe it themselves, "it's on my to-do list" or "it won't happen to me".

But the decision to go for an HIV test should not become a drawn-out deliberation like some teenage existential crisis. Nor should it be something else to think about while the ads are on TV, to talk about over a cup of tea or to think about talking about just after a spur of the moment fuck on the side.

Getting tested is a necessity, an obligation, a commitment to being a responsible citizen of life. Because if

the virus is already in our body's cells then no amount of wishful thinking, procrastinating, intellectualising or hiding it is going to exorcise it.

HIV is not a secret. We may try to bury it as deep as our self-deception will allow, but once we are HIV positive — whether we know it or not — and we are sexually active at the same time, then it's not a secret. Then it's our duty to get tested so that we can inform the other person, no matter how much or how little they mean to us. Whether it's to a life-long spouse or to a temporary mistress or to a rent boy who we've only just met. Because it's their human right to know.

I know people who religiously service their cars, their homes, their appliances and their appearances,

but when it comes to the maintenance of the one system that actually matters, their immune systems, they pass the buck — on to their last fuck.

Many of us, although comprising the minority in this country, can afford to get tested in well-equipped, functioning clinics with experienced nursing staff.

We can quite easily budget for the R100 to R200 that will afford us the luxury of arriving for an appointment at a private clinic in a spacious lobby; and waiting a mere five minutes on a comfortable couch while flipping through glossy pamphlets that offer us all the assistance we need. This includes the pre-test counselling where the nurse, after answering our questions for as long as we want, asks if there is anything more that we would like to ask. And before drawing blood looks us straight in the eye and says: "Do you understand dear?"

But we all know that it's not getting tested that's really the inconvenience to our daily lives; it's our fear that the unknown result will not be that positive.

When I received my results the nurse told me that earlier that same day a woman had tested positive and had said: "I feel positive about being positive" — because she had a feeling that she might be and so she had gone for proper counselling beforehand and decided she would choose to accept it if it turned out to be true.

"Either way, it's about self-empowerment," said the nurse. "Whether you are HIV positive or negative, it's up to you to decide if you just want to survive or you want to live."

Even though I felt positive about being negative, I would hope that, had I, too, tested positive I would have honoured my dignity and self-worth by choosing to share the same attitude as that woman had that day.