



### ▶ **How long ago and how did you find out you were HIV-positive?**

I was diagnosed in December 2013 during a routine check at 56 Dean Street, an expert sexual health clinic in London that specializes in sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

### ▶ **What was your reaction to finding out you were HIV-positive?**

When the rapid test came back as positive it was a massive shock. You always think about HIV but never expect it to knock on your life's door. I immediately felt scared and started thinking that my sex and love life ended at that point. My mind was trying to think who transmitted this disease to me, to whom might have I passed it on, how will I hide this from my mum and dad, and how negatively it will affect my life. After the second test and the confirming result I started crying non-stop. Luckily, the clinic had a dedicated psychologist who immediately came into the room and sat with me for a couple of hours. Together with a nurse, they tried to help me calm down, started explaining how my life will continue and how to find support groups. From that day forward and for a long period of time afterwards I fell into a deep depression; feeling disgusted about myself, not feeling comfortable in my own skin – as if I fell into the bottom of a bucket and couldn't make a step upwards towards the top. It takes years to come to terms with such a diagnosis. Surely, you are never the same again as your everyday life is affected. Decisions that one might make so easily are not easy anymore as your health must come first.

### ▶ **What was your family and friends' reaction when you told them, and has it affected your relationship with them?**

I decided not to tell my parents. When I told my siblings they were in shock, as were my friends, but they tried to reassure me that I had their support and I had nothing to worry about. Being HIV-positive obviously affects your everyday life, your relationships, your friendships, and it shakes your whole world. Other than the side effects there is so much stigma around.

### ▶ **What do you think is the biggest public misconception for HIV-positive people?**

There is a lot of prejudice led by inadequate education. When people hear you are HIV-positive, they get scared and assume you are going to transmit the virus to them just by touching them.

### ▶ **How long did it take for you to start receiving treatment?**

I started taking medication a month after my diagnosis when I was still in the UK. There are several benefits to starting treatment early, before the immune system gets highly affected by the virus, and before it affects the nervous system. It takes 3-6 months of early treatment to make the viral load undetectable, but more importantly, early treatment is linked to normal life expectancy.



### ▶ **Do you currently receive any medical treatment? If so, how often and from where do you receive the medication?**

Antiretroviral therapy is given to me free of charge. There is only one clinic in Cyprus that deals with people with STDs, including HIV. For this reason, I must travel to another city, more than an hour away, to collect my medication from that specific clinic. Another obstacle HIV-positive people face is that we are only given two months' worth of medication. In my case, I take three pills per day, and as you can imagine, I have to take a day off work every two months to make the trip to receive my treatment.



**“Stop blaming yourself, this could happen to anyone.”**

**Would you say that overall HIV medication is easily accessible in Cyprus?**

No, it is not easily accessible, especially for those who believe that they have been exposed to the virus, as they have to visit Grigorios Clinic in Larnaca during working hours to access PEP (post exposure prophylaxis) and other relevant medication.

**What do you do in cases of a medical emergency?**

I've been told that if I have an emergency in Cyprus and I need to spend some time in the hospital, I should ideally go and be treated at Grigorios Clinic in Larnaca, as other hospitals do not have antiviral medication, and if I stop receiving my medication I risk raising my viral load. In the UK, you can just go to the nearest hospital and you will receive the appropriate treatment.

**Do you have to disclose your medical condition to your employer? How does being HIV-positive affect your work life?**

I always disclose my status to my employer, not only for medical emergencies, but also because I have to be away from work a few days per year to do my blood tests and receive my medication. Disclosing your status to your employer can be intimidating, especially when changing jobs. The side effects of HIV also make your everyday work life difficult, and getting sick easily makes other coworkers see you differently.



**Are there any support groups for HIV-positive people?**

While I was still living in the UK, I was lucky enough to attend support group meetings for newly diagnosed people held by volunteers who were also HIV-positive. The education, awareness and support I received helped me to overcome shame and boosted my self-esteem when I was at my lowest. It would be helpful if medical experts or HIV-positive people who have experienced the same hardships were involved in Cypriot support groups. I know a lot of HIV-positive people who live in Cyprus and were diagnosed here who never received any support and guidance through this difficult time in their lives.

**What's your advice to people who have been recently diagnosed with HIV?**

Stop blaming yourself, this could happen to anyone. Stop looking for the person who did this to you. When you are at the bottom, the only way is up. People love you, and you will make it through.

**What's your advice to family and friends of people who have been recently diagnosed with HIV?**

Start educating yourself about HIV, the benefits of starting early treatment and the side effects. More importantly, allow time to heal. Don't pull yourself away from your family member or friend – they need your support more than ever. A newly diagnosed person feels desperate about their situation and they need to know they are being loved.

**What changes would you like to see in Cyprus in the next few years to improve the life of an HIV-positive person?**

People need to come out and talk about being HIV-positive, not just everyday

people but famous artists, etc. Hospitals need to be more aware and knowledgeable of the disease, and the disease needs to be seen for what it is. People with HIV, who take daily antiretroviral medication, can achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load and have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting HIV, which highlights the benefits of medication.

I would also like to see more accessible treatment systems through dedicated expert sexual health clinics in every town with easily accessible PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) and PEP medication, more education in schools, laws to protect you at work, financial and psychological support, support groups for the diagnosed, higher medical budget and better organization. In Cyprus, there is a steady increase in the number of HIV patients while many other countries have reduced the rates of transmission, and I believe this is due to the lack of actions taken here, whether this is regarding governmental support, education or awareness. We have to reduce the stigma around HIV, and find the correct way of approaching, helping and treating patients.

*Interview conducted December 2022*



**To learn more about HIV and AIDS visit the following links:**

- [https://www.who.int/health-topics/hiv-aids#tab=tab\\_](https://www.who.int/health-topics/hiv-aids#tab=tab_)
- <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/hiv-infection-and-aids>

**Disclaimers:**

- The name has been omitted to protect the privacy of the individual taking part in the interview.
- The content of this interview is intended for informational purposes only, and should not be perceived as medical advice. Always seek advice from your healthcare providers if you have questions or concerns about HIV or treatment.

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